

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

CATHOLIC
THEOLOGY
BASICS

BY
STEVE MUELLER

FAITH ALIVE BOOKS

Grand Rapids, MI
Available at www.eCatechist.com

FAITH ALIVE BOOKS

Daniel J. Pierson, Publisher
491 Prestwick Dr. SE
Grand Rapids MI 49546
tel: 616-956-5044
www.eCatechist.com

©2022 Steve Mueller All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.
Some material in this book originally appeared in *the Catechist’s Guide to Reading Your Bible: A Catholic View* (Faith Alive Books, 2014).

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

All quotations from Scripture unless otherwise indicated are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, © 1993 and 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

About the Author

Steve Mueller, PhD, author of the 5 books in *The Catechist’s Guide* reading series from Faith Alive Books, has taught Philosophy, Theology, Scripture and Catholic Studies. He helped develop and taught for several years in the renowned Denver Catholic Biblical School, was editor-in-chief of the monthly periodical for Eucharistic spirituality *Living with Christ* and a managing editor for Morehouse Education Resources for lectionary-based catechesis and sacramental preparation resources. He is the current editor for *Words of Grace: Daily Reflections & Prayers for Catholics* for All Saints Press (www.AllSaintsPress.com).

Table of Contents

Introduction 3

1.. Sacred Scripture 5

2.. God 18

3.. Jesus 25

4.. The Holy Spirit 32

5.. Salvation History 39

6. The Church 46

7. The Sacraments. 53

8.. Resources for Further Theological Study 60

Introduction

The reality of our lives is this: We are born in mystery, we live in mystery, we die in mystery. Theology is the quest to understand and articulate our relationship with this mystery “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Theology, from the Greek words *theos* (God) + *logos* (word or idea) describes what we think and say is true about God. It affirms the existence of a divine reality and a corresponding ordering of all life in relation to this deity. In its simplest form, we are doing theology when we express our beliefs about who God is and what God is doing in relation to us and to our world.

When anyone affirms God’s reality—which is the basic affirmation of all religious believers no matter what their particular religious tradition—then that individual adopts a *theological* ordering of life in which everything finds its ultimate meaning in relation to this divine being. In this way, having a theology implies that everything is ultimately *logical* only in relation to God (*theos*).

But since affirming and explaining are two different intellectual operations, affirming something as true and explaining why it is true are two very different things. Even in our daily lives, we know that affirming *that* something is so does not mean I can explain *how* it is so. I can use my smart phone all day without having a clue about how it works its magic. So theological thinking begins when we go beyond just affirming our beliefs to explaining them.

For the religious person, belief is always the starting point. There is no methodic doubt. We start with what we believe—the task is to understand it. Understanding demands a critically self-conscious approach that includes:

1. an examination of our experience of living, including both its secular and religious dimensions
2. a consciousness of our presuppositions, perspectives (worldview), prejudices, truth claims, and evidence
3. a clarification of our search for meaning (understanding), meaningfulness (values) and truth (judgment)
4. an understanding of their impact on our beliefs, on our thinking and on our actions

All theology is first limited by its object because God is not exactly like anything that we know of in our world but is always “more.” The Judeo-Christian tradition describes this divine fullness of being as God’s transcendent personal mystery. As **transcendent**, God is a different kind of reality from all those that we directly experience through our senses. As **personal**, God is not simply an abstract power or force but a being who like us possesses the distinctively

personal capacities for knowing, loving, freely choosing and relating to others. As a **mystery**, God exists in a way that can never be completely understood by our concepts or ideas. God is always more than we can ever comprehend or understand completely through our knowledge. We can summarize the Judeo-Christian understanding of God briefly as follows.

First, God is not directly sense perceptible by us and dwells in a realm (called *heaven*, but this is not a material place like our world) that is totally different and inaccessible from our world. God is transcendent and completely other than anything we know and so is a mystery that we can glimpse in a minuscule way only when God freely chooses to reveal that hidden divine mystery to us in perceptible ways. This notion of mystery hints at the “unutterable” reality of God. Since we never have adequate concepts and words to capture what God is really like, all our expressions present only a diluted and incomplete picture of God.

Second, this transcendent God has freely chosen to come from beyond our world to be present or immanent in our world and act in its history. Although God promises to be with us, in reality this abiding divine presence was (and is) always rather elusive and never under our manipulation and control.

This combination of divine characteristics describes God’s reality but does not explain it. We can never really define God because God is a mystery—an enigma whose content is so inexhaustible and rich, so complex and puzzling to our minds that are geared to knowing through the senses, that it is impossible for our minds to capture God in an adequate concept or idea. We can merely state what we believe God to be and describe, as best we can, how God functions in relation to us and our world through the mediation of created realities.

Our theological affirmations are possible only because we believe that this divine transcendent personal mystery has been freely revealed in our world. God’s mystery makes itself present in human history by deeds and words. And because we know from experience that people’s actions reveal their interior selves and their identity, we can devise a descriptive theology of God by examining God’s actions in our history. Moreover, since we believe that God is personal, we conclude from our own experience of personal agents that God’s words and actions must be intentional (both free and directed to external expression or communication) and thus reveal to us God’s inner personal reality, intentions and identity.

With this in mind, let us now turn to a basic explanation of seven major topics of theology: Scripture, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Salvation History, the Church and the Sacraments, with suggested references to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for further reading, investigation and information. For an online version see www.vatican.va/archive/ccc/index.htm

1. Sacred Scripture

The Bible Is Our Sacred Text

For Catholic Christians, the Bible is not just another book on the local bookstore shelf. We have certain theological beliefs about the Bible before we ever come to read it. In brief, as Vatican Council II expressed it, we believe that our Bible is “the words of God, expressed in human language” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* [*Dei Verbum*], #13). Our Bible is not just a book; it’s our sacred book. Addressing the members of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (May 17, 1984), Pope John Paul II reminded them and us that:

“Each day the Church feels more clearly the need to turn to the sacred Scriptures to read what the Church is and what she is called to be. There is no spiritual, catechetical or pastoral life which does not require a constant return to the sacred books. Do not cease to scrutinize these texts through philological, linguistic, literary and historical research. This leads to a better understanding of the word of God.”

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. The biblical story is the story of God with us, and this story continues to shape our lives and our world. For more, see CCC, #101–104, and for the most comprehensive explanation of the Catholic approach to Scripture see the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993). For an online version, see https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pbcinterpretation.htm

Our Four Basic Catholic Beliefs about the Bible

Our goal here is not to argue in theological detail about our Catholic beliefs about the Bible but rather to acknowledge them and understand how they influence our approach to the Bible. These assumptions do not come explicitly from the Bible itself but are the theological beliefs that shape our approach when we pick up this text. They are like eyeglasses through which we see everything else but hardly notice wearing anymore because we have grown so used to them.

The sacred character of the Bible can be summarized in our four Catholic beliefs about it, namely that:

- God has had a special role in the production (**inspiration**)
- of just these particular sacred books (**canonical**)
- which disclose the truth of God’s own mysterious reality (**revelation**)
- without error in these divinely revealed truths (**inerrancy**).

When we identify the Bible as our sacred text, we are declaring our beliefs *about* the Bible. As Christians, we affirm that the Bible is not just another book. 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 Bible was composed by human authors using their literary gifts to express their experiences of God, we believe that God also cooperated in the production of the text so that these books contain a divinely revealed message.

This sacred character sets the Bible apart from all other books. Of course, non-Christian believers have their own sacred books and their own explanation of why their texts are sacred and how they ought to be properly interpreted. But the sacred aspect of our Christian biblical text is summarized in the four following theological claims. For more, see CCC, #84–95, 170–171.

Claim 1: The Bible Is Inspired

Our first theological claim about the Bible as our sacred text is that its composition is inspired. **Inspiration** means “to breathe into.” The image here is of God breathing into the original authors the vital energy to write the ideas that express God’s special revealed meanings.

When we claim that the composition of the biblical books is inspired, we are claiming that they are not merely human endeavors but that God somehow aided the human authors to produce the text that God desired. But we must note that our belief that the texts are inspired is a theological claim and not an explanation of the process. Remember that a claim that something is true is not to be confused with an explanation of how it can be so as we know so well from our own experience. For example, we know that our computer can handle thousands of tasks every second or that our car runs when we start it, without necessarily having a clue about how exactly they really work.

Another example is our theological belief concerning Jesus. We believe that he is both truly human and truly divine, yet no theologian has ever provided a satisfactory explanation of how exactly this mystery occurs. Likewise our belief in divine inspiration affirms *that* God aided in the composition of the biblical text. But this is not a psychological description of *how* God influenced the writers. This process, but not the result, will always remain shrouded in mystery.

We must also remember that when we are talking about biblical inspiration, we are talking about the written texts. Since all of the biblical books are inspired, we must recognize that in communicating with us God has inspired many different types or forms of literature—poetry, prose, narratives, stories, proverbs, parables, songs, oracles, letters and historical documents. As Vatican Council II reminds us, “truth is presented and expressed differently in historical, prophetic

or poetic texts, or in other styles of speech” (*Dei Verbum*, #12). If we do not acknowledge this diversity of literary types, we run the risk of missing the message God desires to communicate to us. It is not enough to assume, as some people try to do, that everything in the Bible must be historical. See CCC, #105–11, 1101.

Claim 2: The Bible Is Our Rule of Life

The Bible as a sacred text is the standard for our lives as Christian believers. These particular books collected as our Bible provide the fixed standard against which we measure the authenticity of our Christian faith and its practice. The Greek word for this standard or ruler is *canon*. So we describe these biblical books as **canonical**. There are two characteristics of something that is canonical: First, it must be fixed as a standard; second, it can be used to measure other things.

For any standard to be effective, it has to be fixed and constant. Can you imagine trying to measure things with a ruler whose length is constantly changing? Thus the term **canonical** identifies only the books we include in the Bible. There are many other books that are as old as biblical books, but they are not included in the official list, the fixed standard or canon of Scripture.

Again, although we do not have all the historical data to know exactly how the early Christian community settled on just these particular books from among the many that they might have had available, we do believe that the process of selection was guided by God’s Holy Spirit. And we also know that between the second and fourth centuries the Catholic canon, or official list of biblical books, was essentially decided.

This fixing of the canon allows all later Christians to measure their faith against the standard “rule” of the early communities. The designation of only these books as canonical does not deny that non-biblical books can contain some truth about God or about the Christian life. Nor does it limit the developing theological reflection that over the centuries leads to more precise expressions of the biblical truths. The canon provides the basic standard against which the meaning and usefulness of these other books can be measured.

For us Christians, God is not only in the Bible but is also present and working in our everyday lives. We believe that the biblical texts provide our most reliable clues as we discover and understand God’s self-revelation in our world. The Bible is our most trustworthy guide to the knowledge of God’s sacred reality and the most helpful source for the most authentic responses that we can make to God’s transforming presence when we discover it. With the help of these biblical texts, we can learn how to clarify our relationship with God and discover new ways to live it out in our lives today. For more, see CCC, #120–130.

Claim 3: The Bible Is Revealed

Our third theological faith claim about the Bible as our sacred text is that its content or message is revealed. Reveal means “to take the veil off” or to uncover something that is now hidden. Just as we never know the hidden thoughts or feelings of other persons unless they communicate them to us in words or actions, so the Bible is described as God’s self-revelation, or word, to us, which freely reveals the hidden mysteries of God’s inner self as a personal communication or word and not just a list of abstract truths.

When we claim that God uses these human texts to reveal, or uncover, the hidden mystery of God’s self for us, we describe these texts as revealed. Since texts disclose the mind of the author, every text is a kind of self-revelation in which the hidden depths of the author are expressed. Thus for biblical texts, the interior mystery of both the divine author and the human authors can be discerned. But it is only the divine self-revelation that makes our texts sacred.

The Bible is our sacred text because it discloses, or reveals, God’s personal mystery. We could never know this mystery unless God freely communicated it to us in ways we understand. Moreover, this self-disclosure never happens once and for all. Just as it takes a lifetime of experience to get to know a human person, so we must expect that knowing God’s mysterious person is a process that begins in our human lifetime but certainly does not end there. See CCC, #68–73, 230.

Claim 4: The Bible Is without Error Only in Its Revealed Truth

The final faith claim about the Bible as our sacred text is that it is without error in the divine truths that God reveals to us for our salvation. This claim of truth follows from the character of the text both as revealed and as inspired by God’s free personal activity to communicate with us.

The truths of divine revelation are not something that we could learn about God by using our human intelligence. If we could discover these truths on our own, then God would not need to reveal them. Instead, these divinely revealed truths are something that we would never have imagined, much less discovered by ourselves—especially the trinitarian reality of God and the incarnate, divine-human reality of Jesus of Nazareth. These core revelations are the foundation for all of our specifically Christian truths.

Theologians call these divinely revealed truths mysteries. A theological mystery describes something that our minds can never totally comprehend no matter how hard or how long we think about it. These mysteries like the Trinity and the Incarnation are so profound that our human thinking will never explain them or exhaust their richness. Again, we can affirm by faith that they are true, but no amount of human effort will ever explain how they can be so since they

VATICAN COUNCIL II ON THE THEOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BIBLE AS OUR SACRED TEXT

The most authoritative Roman Catholic faith affirmations about the four characteristics of the biblical text as revealed, inspired, inerrant regarding the truths of revelation, and canonical can be found in Vatican Council II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*, DV). The highlights of these Catholic affirmations are summarized here.

The Bible is our sacred text because it is:

1. Revealed (DV #2): God's free self-communication for our salvation

"God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will.... Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to humanity as friends and lives among them so that he might invite and take them into fellowship with him. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teachings and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation, then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of humanity is made clear to us in Christ who is the mediator and at the same time the fullness of revelation."

Our theological belief in divine revelation also affirms that God freely chose "to share those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind" (DV #6). These divine truths alone can be identified as the truths of revelation.

2. Inspired (DV #11): God's assistance to the human authors to write their books

"Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose humans and while employed by God they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with God acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which God wanted. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."

3. Without error in the truths of our salvation (see last sentence of quote under 2)

4. Canonical and normative for all members of the Church (see quote under 2)

So the sacredness of our biblical texts is expressed by faith claims, supported by reason, and requires a faith-oriented approach to guide the historical-critical and other methods used for interpreting their meanings (DV #12). And see especially the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*) because encountering this biblical text will transform our lives (DV #21, 26).