

Called To Lead
**A Handbook for
Facilitators
of Bible Study Groups**



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Foreword

The need for a handbook for leaders was not evident when we first began to publish *JOURNEY*. In fact we had hoped that the material would be simple enough that almost any lay person could with a little effort study the material and join with others in a cooperative spirit which would carry them through the Bible. Our experience over the years and the many letters which have come to us show that this has indeed happened in some areas but in the majority of cases *JOURNEY* groups have persevered where solid leaders were active. For this reason the need for this kind of booklet has become more urgent.

I am happy that there is a chapter on the Church's teaching on the interpretation of the Bible. I have often thought that there is a great need for Catholics to become more familiar with this teaching.

The need for Catholics to form small groups to study the Bible has not diminished in the years since the first publication of *JOURNEY*. In fact I would say that the need has increased. If this book can help in this area then it will truly be of service to the Church.

+ Marcel Gervais,

Bishop of Sault Ste.

Note: Bishop Gervais later became the Archbishop of Ottawa, Canada. He is now retired as Archbishop emeritus.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Bishop Marcel Gervais for the use of his material on the “Interpretation of the Bible” We are grateful to Ron Pickersgill, Joyce Kilpatrick and Shirley Mitchell for their help in editing and proofreading this material and to Father Tom Collins and Father Fred Scinto for their contributions to the section on Bible Versions.

Cover design by Pat Lajoie

Cover: Jesus at the Last Supper, teaching his disciples that true leadership is service.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations . . . and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you . . ." (*Matthew* 28:19-20). The fact that Jesus addressed this command to the eleven apostles shows us that the early Church recognized that the Apostles had a unique responsibility for handing on the faith. They, in turn shared this responsibility with many others (*Acts* 6,7,8).

The concept of shared responsibility has gained new prominence since the Second Vatican Council. All members of the Church - priests, religious, and laity - have a role to play in spreading and teaching the faith. As Pope John Paul II has said, ". . . all have in various degrees very precise responsibilities in this education of the believing conscience (On *Catechesis in Our Time*, no. 16).

Since the Second Vatican Council, we have witnessed not only the increased involvement by the laity in teaching our faith to others, but a new focus on the religious education of adults. Pope John Paul II states: "This is the principle form of catechesis, because it is addressed to persons who have the greatest responsibilities and the capacity to live the Christian message in its fully developed form" (*On Catechesis in Our Time*, no. 43).

The new emphasis on adult religious education makes it essential that the people involved in this field be knowledgeable, not only of doctrine, but of the most effective ways to communicate it to adults.

The purpose of this booklet is to set forth the most important principles of effective adult education, and guidelines for leaders of adult study groups.

Introduction

We present these principles and guidelines in a general fashion, so that they can be used by leaders of various kinds of groups - those studying Scripture, Marriage and Family, Social Justice, Church History, or any other religious subject.

Our primary focus, however, is the Bible study group. For this reason, we include a chapter specifically on leading such a group. We also include a chapter on the principles of biblical interpretation according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

1. How Adults Learn

Principles of Adult Education

Adults learn best when they can:

- choose what they will learn;
- choose how they will learn;
- express (verbalize) what they are learning;
- test what they are learning by relating it to their life-experience;
- receive feedback from, and be challenged by other adults;
- see the value of what they are learning;
- learn in a comfortable environment.

If these principles are respected, any teaching method will be effective.

Teaching methods

When we think of formal religious education, we usually think of one of the following learning methods: lecture, individual study, and group discussion.

The lecture

The lecture can be an effective way for adults to learn, but it is often ineffective. Too often it fails to respect the freedom, maturity, and life-experience of an adult audience. Furthermore, a lecture usually involves a large number of persons listening to what someone has to say on a certain subject. This format puts the learner

How Adults Learn

in a passive learning mode - the learner simply takes in information. There is usually little opportunity for the hearer to interact with the speaker. The larger the group, the less chance there is for questions and dialogue. And it often happens that the lecturer is not really in touch with the audience, so that he or she fails to address the questions they seek answers for.

But there are good lecturers who respect people's freedom and lifeexperience, and who can speak to the needs of their audience.

Individual study

Individual study is a good learning method for adults because it respects the first two principles of adult education - that adults want the freedom to select *what they will learn* and the *method by which they will learn*. If there is a fault in the individual study method, it is that it does not allow the person to share and test his or her newly-acquired knowledge in the community of other adults.

Group discussion

When it is properly conducted, group discussion is the learning method best suited to the way adults learn because it respects the principles mentioned above. It allows the participants to enter into the learning process as adults; it allows them to take an active and responsible role in their own learning.

The weakness in the group discussion method of learning is that it can end up being a sharing of ignorance.

The effectiveness of group discussion is greatest when it is combined with high quality input from either a lecturer or written material.

What teaching method did Jesus employ? Many of us picture him in the lecture mode - delivering speeches to large crowds. But he must have also used a kind of group discussion method when he spoke intimately with his close friends. We can imagine some lively exchanges on many points of Jewish law and religious practice.

2. How to be an Effective Group Leader



Jesus, sharing with his disciples at table. (*Mark 4:10*)

How to be an Effective Group Leader

The purpose of this chapter is to present the skills and attitudes essential in a good leader and some basics on how a group functions.

If we lived in an ideal world, all participants in small group learning situations would take an equal part in the process, and no leader would be necessary. In reality, however, groups function in different ways, many of which are bad for the group learning process. Here are some typical ways:

The flop occurs when the group is unsure of why they are gathered or what they are expected to do or say. The leader starts with a question and everyone simply sits there waiting for someone else to speak.

The **dictatorship** happens when the leader or someone else completely dominates the meeting by doing all the talking. Some leaders use their position as a platform to express their own opinion or to show off their knowledge of the subject.

Some groups suffer from domination by a smaller group that takes over the discussion and is allowed to do so by the silent majority.

The **cream puff** is the group that accepts everything without thinking. They make it easy for a dictatorship to develop.

Some group members simply **surrender**, or compromise, just to keep the discussion moving along.

The ideal form of discussion is **unanimous consent**, in which all members have agreed to the goals and the method of learning; they know their roles and they all share responsibility for making the discussion fruitful.

Most groups need an acknowledged leader if they are to function well.

Interpersonal communication

According to Dr. Edward Wakin, a professor of Communications at Fordham University, being an effective communicator requires five interpersonal components:

- an adequate self-concept, the single most important factor affecting people's communication with others;
- the ability to be a good listener;
- the skill of expressing one's thoughts and ideas clearly;
- being able to cope with one's emotions, particularly one's feelings of anger, and expressing them in a constructive way;
- the willingness to disclose oneself to others truthfully and freely (this can be learned).

What is a leader?

To lead is to guide, to show the way. The leader is one of the group, not separate from it.

When Jesus picked leaders for his Church, he did not choose the most educated - the doctors and lawyers who felt themselves superior to ordinary folk. Instead, he chose from among ordinary people.

There are some misconceptions about the term leader which can create an obstacle to the proper understanding of the term. For some people, the word leader connotes power, control, domination. For this reason it may be better to use the term "facilitator", a word that comes from the Latin "facilis" which means easy. To be a facilitator is to make it easier for the group to function. To make easy means to remove obstacles. The leader takes the responsibility for overcoming obstacles as they arise. In this sense, the image of a good facilitator is not one of power and control, but service.

How to be an Effective Group Leader

In this book we use both terms. But we remind you that when we use the word leader we have in mind the concept of someone who serves.

It is the model of service which Jesus presented to his apostles and disciples: “You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all” (Mark 10:42-43).

The good leader approaches his or her role with humility. The sign of a really successful group meeting is that the group members come away thinking they were responsible for the success of the meeting, and the leader’s influence has hardly been noticed.

The leader is the navigator. The group is on a journey and the leader must set the sails to use the wind to advantage in order to reach their destination.

The leader, therefore, is someone who serves, not from weakness, but from strength and confidence, with a good deal of humility.

Training fundamentals

Some people believe that they are born leaders, while others think they can never be a good leader. In fact, good leaders are made, not born.

If you have experience in leadership, you can always increase and improve your skills. If you have no previous experience, you nevertheless have gifts and talents that will enhance your ability to lead.

Effective leadership of small groups requires training, and this involves time and effort. We believe that during his public ministry Jesus spent a lot of time teaching and forming the men he chose to lead his church.

If you are going to grow in your leadership skills, remember the following points:

- You must believe that you can become a good leader.
- You must have a willingness to learn and a determination to grow.

To say that good leaders are made, not born, is to say that a process of development must take place. Each person is at a different stage of development. No one is at the beginning; no one has arrived at the end of the process. But all are on the way.

Reading a manual or attending a workshop will not automatically make you a good leader; growth takes place through both study and practice. You cannot become a cross country skier simply by reading a “how-to” manual. It is only when you put on the skis and expend a great deal of effort that you become a cross country skier. Likewise, you will only become a good group leader by actually leading a group and exercising the skills you have learned.

This manual will give you new knowledge, new skills, new attitudes. You already have a great deal of knowledge and experience, so perhaps this material will simply reinforce what you already know. You will read something and say “yes that is true”. It may be simply a case of being assured that you are on the right track.

Personal preparation before your meeting

Remote

As the facilitator, you have a responsibility to be as familiar as possible with the subject of the discussion. If it is a Scripture course such as JOURNEY, it is much better if you have been through it under someone else’s leadership. But in many cases this is not possible and the fact that you do not have this experience should not hinder you from taking on the leadership. If you can do extra reading do so.

Immediate

Take time before your meeting to remember what you are about - leading other adults in their journey of learning and discovery. Imagine how the discussion might proceed. Prepare some questions that you might use if necessary. Take time to relax and to pray. The Holy Spirit will not let you down.

Setting up

The physical arrangement of tables and chairs is important for good group discussion. You should be at or near the centre so that every participant can see and hear you and everyone else. A round table is best, if the group is small enough. Otherwise, set the tables up in a horseshoe shape with yourself at the centre.

A common mistake is to use a long rectangular table with the leader at one end. This divides the group and tends to cause small groups of people to go off into discussions of their own.

A small room in your church or local school is ideal, but a room in someone's home can work well. Be aware, though, that a home setting can sometimes pose problems. There should be a minimum of distractions, such as the phone, and the TV. The seats can sometimes be so comfortable that the participants lose their enthusiasm. Choose a dining room or kitchen table in preference to couches.

At your first meeting

The first time the group comes together, you should discuss and agree on the ground rules for the meetings. Your discussion should include your role as leader, as well as the role of each participant and of the whole group.

A discussion of roles is especially helpful at the beginning, because it helps participants to know what is expected of them. It is an invitation for all to play their role, and share responsibility for the success of the group learning process.

Let the group know that you will conduct occasional evaluation sessions.

Routine

Establish and maintain a certain routine for your meetings. You might start each session with prayer, a brief statement of the agenda for the evening, a summary of what happened at the last session, and a way to lead the group into the subject of the meeting.

Decide how long your meetings will last (an hour and a half is about right). It is

important, however, to set a regular time and to stick to it. Always start promptly at the set time, or else people will come later and later.

Finishing up

Make it a point of honour always to end at the agreed time. Promptness and regularity are essential to the long-term success of a group. It allows group members to arrange rides, babysitters, etc.

Sometimes, when the group is in the middle of an enthusiastic discussion, you will be tempted to let the meeting go on. Don't. It is better to have the group go home enthusiastic and eager for more than to beat the topic to death. On some occasions, it may even be wise to cut the meeting short if people have covered enough material.

Announce the termination of discussion and summarize what has been covered or have one of the participants summarize. In this way you get to listen to someone else's perception of the meeting. Finally, introduce the topic and material to be covered at your next meeting.

Evaluation

Hold a formal evaluation session at intervals - perhaps every four or five meetings. Evaluation is important because it allows the group to make adjustments and suggestions if things are not going well.

You can also obtain feedback in an informal way. For example, at the end of the evening you might say "How do you feel about this?" or "What should we do next week?"

In some cases it is a good idea to phone a couple of the participants and to ask them what is their perception of the group's progress. In a difficult situation you may ask what is wrong.

Your role as facilitator

Get everyone to participate

The good facilitator leads by getting all members to participate and share responsibility for the success of the meeting.

Participation does not only mean talk. Some people will say nothing for long periods of time but their body language tells you that they are listening and involved. Remember that some people find it difficult to talk and are more comfortable listening. They usually surprise the group when they do talk and give some profound insights.

Let each be comfortable with his or her contribution but make sure that everyone gets a chance to contribute. This means limiting those who tend to have an opinion on every topic and inviting others to share who are hesitant to speak.

Ask open-ended questions

Open-ended questions cannot be answered simply by a 'yes' or 'no'. Use questions like "What did you think about this comment ... ?" or "What did you feel about the explanation for ... ?"

Wait for a response

It is essential to establish from the beginning that you are prepared to wait for a response. If you jump in too quickly, you may stifle some very interesting observations. Besides, it can be good for the group to just meditate and to ponder the insights offered.

Most people feel uncomfortable with a period of silence during a group meeting. Don't be. Experience will teach you to tell the difference between brief periods of silence that are good, and periods of silence that are too long.

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Hold to the subject

A large part of your job as facilitator is to keep the group focussed on the subject of the discussion. Don't get hung up on small points. Be prepared to handle the kind of question that throws the group completely off topic. Suggest that it would be better discussed at another time. Make note of it on an "unfinished business" board, to be dealt with at the end of the evening.

On the other hand, be ready for some occasional straying from the business at hand because it is essential in religious education that the learning be personal and that it touch people's experience.

Be a good listener

Listen carefully and attentively to the persons speaking. Look at them. Let them know you value what they have to say.

Listen for feelings rather than content. Use 'I' statements to share what you think: "I have read that . . ." Use 'you' statements to express someone else's feelings: "You feel angry, confused, affirmed, more comfortable etc . . ."

Be conscious of the process that is taking place - who is listening and who is anxious to speak, who hasn't shared yet and who needs to be affirmed.

Pause and verify

Pause after every statement or opinion. In this way you will be sure the person is finished speaking. It is a good idea to verify that you have correctly understood what the person said. This gives the person the opportunity to clarify or to amplify any point.

Agree and affirm

You might be tempted to notice mistakes or areas of disagreement and to correct these

immediately. Instead of doing this, reinforce and affirm the effort of the person. In anything that anyone says, you can find at least an element of truth, or an underlying positive value. Find it and affirm them for it.

Learn to overlook the little errors that aren't terribly serious. Point out deficiencies or errors only when absolutely necessary.

And do it with the utmost tact, delicacy, gentleness, and respect. Recall how you feel when someone corrects or criticizes you.

Be polite

Regardless of what happens it is essential that you be polite and courteous at all times. Remember that you are a model to the others in the group.

Press on

If the group has resolved an issue or a problem, summarize the point and move on.

Avoid being the white knight

Any member of a group, but especially the leader, is tempted to offer quick advice or to preach, so as to solve someone's problems: you should do such and such ... "Well, I had that problem but ... " Resist the urge to do this, and gently stop others from doing the same thing. It makes you the superior one and it belittles the other person. Give advice only when someone specifically asks for it.

Keep yourself out of it

You will be tempted to play the role of the expert and do most of the talking in the group. It is important to remember that people learn best by expressing themselves. They remember what they say more than what others say. They also feel better if they say it. Opinions and attitudes are more apt to change as a result of people expressing themselves rather than simply listening. If you allow each person to have a say, he or she will feel

better about the group and about what they are learning. So the success of the group learning process depends less on what you say than on what they say.

Be yourself

There are many successful leadership styles. Style is simply a matter of being yourself on purpose. Be yourself, but be a disciplined you.

Listening can be learned

Listening is a skill. It can be learned.

Dr. Edward Wakin suggests ten guidelines for better listening:

Be interested and show it. Genuine interest and a lively curiosity encourage others to speak freely. Interest also sharpens your attention and builds on itself.

Tune in to the other person. Try to understand his or her viewpoint, assumptions, needs and system of beliefs.

Hold your fire. Avoid jumping to conclusions. Hear the speaker out. Plan your response only after you are certain that you've heard the whole message.

Look for the main ideas. Avoid being distracted by details. Focus on the key issue. You may have to dig hard to find it.

Watch for feelings. Often people talk to "get something off their chests." Feelings, not facts, may be the main message.

Monitor your own feelings and point of view. Each of us listens differently. Our convictions and emotions filter - even distort - what we hear. Be aware of your own attitudes, prejudices, cherished beliefs and your emotional reaction to the message.

Notice nonverbal language. A shrug, a smile, a nervous laugh, gestures, facial expressions and body positions speak volumes. Start to "read" them.

Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. We often enter conversations with our minds already made up, at least partially, on the basis of past experience. Prejudgements can shut out new messages.

Work at listening. Hearing is passive. Our nervous system does the work. Listening is active. It takes mental effort and attention.

Get feedback. Make certain you're really listening. Ask a question. Confirm with the speaker what he or she actually said.

The Role of the Members

Some of the members of your group may be “content-oriented”. They seek information, or opinion, or they want to give information or opinion, to elaborate and summarize.

Others will be more conscious of the group process. They are the type who give encouragement, and perhaps serve as gatekeepers by reminding the leader that someone has not had a chance to speak. They are willing to surrender their own agenda for the benefit of the group.

Most participants will probably do a little of each of these, but it is important to make everyone realize that each has a responsibility to help with the group process. If all participants accept these responsibilities, the group discussion will go much better.

Just as it takes time to become a good leader so it may take time for participants to grow in their role. This is a growth process and for some it will begin or be strengthened at these group sessions.

Rules of a good discussion

There are certain rules for making a good discussion. These apply to each member of the group - not just to the leader.

Be aware that the discussion is worth it. It can be rewarding if all play their role.

Be prepared.

If all participants do whatever preparation is required, the group will function better.

Be honest.

No one should think that he or she has all the answers but each

should be ready to contribute whatever they do know. If someone offers an opinion, he or she should make it clear that it is an opinion (this is especially important for the leader).

Be sensitive.

Each should be conscious of the need for all to participate. Each can play his or her role in encouraging, listening for emotion rather than content etc. If this is truly a group of adults seeking to learn in an adult way then they must behave as adults, each accepting responsibility for the functioning of the group.

Each member should show consideration by pausing after someone else speaks, verifying what was said, agreeing whenever possible, and always being polite and courteous.

Three steps for dealing with special cases

What do you do when one participant continues to dominate all discussions despite all the rules having been discussed and agreed upon?

What do you do with “blockers” - those who for one reason or another impede the group process? They are the ones who say “Well, I don’t think we should be dealing with that.” Another type of blocker is the aggressor: “I didn’t come here to listen to that kind of nonsense.” Still another type are the self-confessors, those who believe the whole world wants to hear of their sins and their conversion. There are also the sympathy-seekers and even the jokers who want to turn everything into a joke.

If the group is attentive and sensitive they can gently resolve such problems.

The usual solution is to attempt to bring the person on board by giving him or her a special task in the group. Before the next meeting ask the person privately if he or she could help you with the process. Ask them to look for certain things and help you deal with these.

The second approach is to get the group members to come to your rescue. They will already be conscious of the problem and will make an effort to help.

The final approach is to confront the individual privately, confess your difficulty, and ask him or her to cooperate.

These three steps should be followed as well, when dealing with special cases or any other problems as they arise.

3. How to Lead a Bible-Study Group



The Eucharist, breaking the Word, breaking the Bread.

The story of the People of God is presented to us in Scripture as a journey of faith. Your Bible study group is on a similar journey. One of your most important functions as a leader of such a group is to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in your journey together.

Do we need a guide?

When Philip met the Ethiopian who was reading the prophet Isaiah, he asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man answered: “How can I unless I have someone to guide me?” (Acts 8:26-40). Anyone who has attempted to read the Bible knows this feeling of frustration. In the Bible there is so much material, in so many different styles, that it is hardly possible for the average lay person to make much progress, unless he or she has a guide. As the history of the Church attests, the Bible is open to all kinds of interpretations. Left alone, the individual is open to the possibility of erroneous interpretations. This means that it is essential that a group which undertakes the study of the Bible have a trustworthy guide.

Advantages of group study

As we indicated in the previous chapter, group sharing is the most effective way for adults to assimilate what they learn. This is especially true in the study of the Bible. Each individual comes to certain insights from their reading of the Scripture passages and the study material. These insights need to be shared with the group and in the very process of sharing there is refinement and growth.

The need for a leader

There are two kinds of leadership involved in the formation and functioning of a Bible study group. Someone must start the group

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and someone must lead the group in study and discussion. It often happens that both of these duties fall on the same person, but it is important to distinguish between the two roles. Some people who are good at organizing a Bible study group might have great difficulty in facilitating it. In such a case the organizer should be ready to seek someone else to be a group leader.

Some groups might decide to rotate the responsibility for leading in the group. This can work sometimes, but generally the group will have much greater success if there is one acknowledged leader.

Does the facilitator have to be an expert?

The answer here is no, absolutely not. It is, of course, an advantage to have someone who is an expert. The more one knows, the more one has to offer. But the group leader does not have to be a Scripture scholar.

We might say that the expert is the Bible course we are using, be it *JOURNEY* or any other approved Catholic course. Thus, it is the Church who is guiding the group through this course to a greater understanding of God's word.

A Bible study group should not be conducted like a classroom situation with a teacher and a group of students. People soon become bored by this approach, and they will stop coming to the meetings. The ideal situation is where all the participants, even the experts who may be part of the group, come with the same attitude and desire to learn, not to teach. In this way, each learns and grows, but each in different ways and at different levels. What some lack in formal schooling they often make up for in life experience and wisdom.

Persons who have been through a Bible study program are the ideal candidates for leading a group. If they have had a good experience they have learned a great deal and are full of enthusiasm for the Word of God. This fills them with the desire to learn more, and the opportunity to lead others allows them to continue to grow and learn.

Forming a Bible study group

As a general rule, establish your group from within your parish. It is important for your group to know that your meetings are part of the parish's ministry. Start by contacting your pastor.

Assuming that no group already exists in your parish, or that there are no plans to start one, your next step is to invite others to join you in a group study of the Bible. Place an announcement in the parish bulletin. Remember to include the proposed day on which you will meet, as well as the location and time. Give your name and telephone number so that interested parties can call and make inquiries. It is a good idea to post a list for people to put their name, address, and telephone number.

Location of meetings

As indicated in the previous chapter, a room at your church or local school is ideal, but a home can also work well. If you decide to hold your meetings in a home, be sure to let your parish priest know.

Even if you plan to meet at someone's home, you should consider holding at least your first session at the parish. This is an effective way of reassuring everyone that you are part of the parish's ministry.

Do all the participants have to use the same translation of the Bible?

Any English Bible is a translation, because the Bible was written long before the English language came to be. There are several good English translations, or versions (see Appendix B). It is likely, therefore, that members of your group will possess different versions.

It is sometimes confusing for some to hear different versions of the text, but this is actually a good thing. No translation is perfect. Hearing a different translation often brings out a different shade of meaning. There are enough explanations in Bibles of the variations in verses and chapters that there should be no problem. Nevertheless, take the time to go over the explanations, so that no one will be left in the dark.

Ideal size

The ideal size for a small group discussion is eight to twelve persons. It allows all participants to have an opportunity to express themselves. Smaller groups (three or four) are sometimes difficult because the burden of carrying the discussion is spread too thin. Larger groups do not afford all the members the opportunity to discuss.

If the number of participants exceeds fifteen, you should consider one of two options. One is to split the group into two smaller groups. You can do this if you have someone willing to lead the second group.

Your second option is to split each evening into two parts, after your opening prayer. During the first part, break into small groups for discussion of the texts. Then bring the whole group together for sharing and questions.

Makeup of the group

Your group might be all women, or all men, or all young people. Or it might be a mixture of men and women, old and young. Almost any combination can work. It is wise to have most members coming from the one parish or faith-group.

The presence of one or two participants from another faith-group will enrich your study. The only exception to this is where some persons from a fundamentalist background join the group. Their approach to the Bible is so different that it is likely to impede or disturb the group learning process.

One or two teenagers in a group of older people can also work very well. But if a larger number of teenagers want to join, they would probably be better off with a group of their own.

The first meeting

The first meeting is probably the most important and requires some planning. First, make sure that each participant has all the instructional material beforehand. When you come together for the first time, it is best to get down to business as soon as possible.

This does not mean that some introduction of the participants is not necessary. Indeed, this is how the first meeting should begin, after a brief period of prayer. Nevertheless, do not be too anxious about getting everyone to know each other. With time they will get to know and trust each other.

As indicated in the previous chapter, you will also want to go over the ground rules for the meetings. You can do this fairly quickly. Make it clear that your discussion group is not a classroom situation; that each of you is there to learn; that each is expected to participate actively.

Format for group meetings

Each meeting should have two basic elements: a discussion of the meaning of the biblical text and a discussion of its implications for our life. One method of stimulating discussion is to begin with a review of the stories covered in the text and a discussion of the theology presented. Often a comparison of the meaning of the text for the time it was written with the meaning for today will stimulate very interesting dialogue.

The key, always, is to ask probing questions. Sometimes asking different members to prepare specific questions on different sections of the lesson can be very effective.

A successful meeting can proceed in a variety of ways. Try to vary the meetings as much as possible within the established format. In the end it is experience that will teach you which methods to use. Don't be afraid to experiment with various methods; don't be afraid to fail.

Prayer

It is important that you set a tone of prayer for your meetings. Prayer is our effort to unite ourselves - heart, mind, and soul - to God. Your group shares a desire to know God through His Word, so your whole meeting is itself a prayer.

Most Bible study programs provide some form of prayer for beginning the meeting; the *JOURNEY* program recommends the use of a Psalm. The Psalms are very appropriate since they are the songprayers of the People of God, their response to the action of God in their history. The leader can follow the reading of the Psalm with an informal prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to be present and to guide the group through their deliberations.

How much talking should the leader do?

As we said in the previous chapter, the leader who comes on like the all-knowing teacher does a serious disservice to the group. The better the leader the less he or she will monopolize the discussion.

Yet the leader will usually be at the centre of the action. Like the navigator who keeps the ship on course despite changing winds, the leader initiates and keeps the learning process going - knowing when to carry the group in conversation, and when to be quiet and wait for someone to speak.

Dealing with diversions

Inevitably, your discussion will wander away from the topic. This is quite normal and natural; it is to be expected and welcomed, within certain limits.

As a rule, you should try to bring the group back to the work at hand. But don't be too rigid about it. Be careful not to stifle a good, creative discussion that may not be on the topic but which is, nevertheless, important for people's growth and understanding. People need to express their feelings, their questions, their problems. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is leading them in ways we cannot understand.

The leader must find the right moment to bring them gently to the theology in the text that deals with the same questions and problems.

Difficult Questions

Because you are the leader, many questions will be directed to you, and some will be difficult. The first rule is to allow the group to answer. Most Catholics have years of religious training, as well

as valuable life experience. They know much more about their faith than they realize. They have a sense of what is right and what is wrong, although they may not always be able to express it.

When the question has to do with a point of theology, and if you are trained in that area, answer it honestly. Make sure everyone understands when you are stating the Church's teaching, and when you are stating a personal opinion. It is important to

avoid the pose of the expert as much as possible. Remember that you don't need to know everything. If the group is left hanging, you as the leader should tell them that you will seek an answer from the proper sources or authorities.

Dealing with a crisis of faith

People come to a group with a faith that has been formed over many years. But each person's experience is different, and each is at a different stage of faith development.

Some will have been through Catholic schools, perhaps even university courses in theology or Scripture. Others will have little or no formal religious education.

Reactions of group members will vary, therefore, especially for the first few meetings. Some members who are experiencing their first exposure to modern biblical scholarship will react with fear and anxiety, feeling their long-established assumptions and beliefs to be threatened. A fearful reaction is normal and to be expected.

Don't panic. Remain calm. Let members express their frustrations and anger. Try to address their feelings rather than respond intellectually to their concerns. Let other members speak of their own feelings- when they were first confronted with new ways of looking at

Time, study, and prayer will do a lot to help people become more comfortable and to assimilate new ideas. They will come out of the experience with faith that is stronger, not weaker.

Remind the group that God's spirit is working in them, disturbing them, and calling each person to new growth in faith.

4. Church Teaching on the Interpretation of the Bible



Ezekiel receives God's command to eat the Word of God (*Ezek 2:8*)

Introduction

Any person who undertakes to lead a Catholic Bible study group will need to be familiar with the teaching of the Church on the interpretation of the Bible. This teaching was spelled out at the Second Vatican Council in a document called *On Divine Revelation*. In this chapter, we present a short version of the Church's teaching, based on the commentary by Bishop Gervais found in *JOURNEY*

The Catholic approach to the Bible

In general the guidance that the Church gives for the proper interpretation of the Bible is both very reasonable and very spiritual. The Church holds that God gave people intelligence to be used; God did not give us the gift of reason only to have us abandon it when we approach his Word. At the same time, the Church recognizes that the Bible is the Word of God, and is therefore to be treated with a reverence and devotion that is not given to other books. The Spirit of God speaks to our spirit through his Word. While reason must always be used, the Church knows that the Bible expresses the mystery of God in his relationship to his creation; and that reason alone cannot grasp everything that is in the Word of God found in the Bible. The Word of God is meant to reach to the core of our being; it is meant to touch our lives.

The Bible belongs to the People of God

Without the People of God, there would be no Bible, for the Bible developed within the community of God's People. The Spirit of God worked in, through, and with the People to bring about the writings, to preserve them, and to have them recognized by the People as sacred and inspired. The Bible, therefore, is the work of both the Holy Spirit and the People of God.

The Church is the People

The People of God today - that is, the Church - has a responsibility towards the Bible. The Church is responsible to God and to mankind for making the Word of God known and for giving guidance on how to interpret it properly.

We must use our heads, hearts, and feet

To put it simply we can say that the Church's approach is this: in interpreting and understanding the Bible we are to use our heads, our hearts, and our feet.

We must use our heads to study, because the Bible is an old book. It was written in ancient languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), and it reflects cultures that are unfamiliar to us. We need scholars who do research in every aspect of the languages, the cultures, the ways of writing, and the history of the times in which the Bible came to be. We need scholars to help us

remember how the Church, in her official teaching and through her scholars, has interpreted the Bible in the past.

The Church makes use of scholarly research to help it in the task of giving guidance on how the Bible should be interpreted. But we are reminded by the Church that study alone is not enough.

We need to use our hearts in prayer and contemplation. The first prayer is the liturgy. The Word of God is proclaimed in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist where the People of God assemble to worship. The liturgy itself helps us to interpret the Word of God. In addition to liturgical prayer, the personal contemplation and reflective prayer of all believers deepens the understanding of the Word of God. It is because the Bible addresses itself to the centre of our being that prayer, liturgical and personal, is needed for us to hear and understand it properly

Finally, we must add that much in the Bible will remain closed, unless we “do” the Word of God. Blessed are we if we both hear the Word of God and do it (see Luke 11:28). It is by doing that we experience what love means, what forgiveness means, what faith means, to mention a few examples. This is why some of the greatest interpreters of the Bible were the saints, whose understanding came from “doing the Word” Many things are only understood by walking in the way of the Lord; we must use our feet, as well as our heads and hearts.

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council

The People of God today, that is, the Church, has within it leaders who are empowered to teach with authority on matters which affect the life of the People. These leaders are the bishops of the Church, led by the Pope, the bishop of Rome. Since the Bible is in a special way the Book of the People of God, and since it is so necessary to the life of the People, its appointed leaders have both the duty and the right to guide the People in the understanding and use of the Bible.

During the Second Vatican Council, the bishops, gathered from all over the world, issued a statement on the Bible. This was *Dei Verbum* which is Latin for “The Word of God”.

In this document, the bishops present guidelines for interpreting Sacred Scripture; they do not give official interpretations of each verse. Their guidelines, in fact, are designed to assure a rich and full interpretation of the Scriptures, and to prevent narrow, onesided and cheap interpretations. The guidelines are given to free both the interpreter and the Scriptures themselves from irrational or stupid interpretations, and to guard against interpretations which uproot the Bible from its history and its life in the People of God.

General principles of biblical interpretation

Divine authorship

All the books of the Bible, and all their parts, are sacred because they were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and have God as their author.

Human authorship

God chose human persons and made use of their powers and abilities in such a way that they wrote as true authors. God's grace acting in and through the sacred writers did not make them into robots, without human freedom. On the contrary, the assistance of the Holy Spirit rendered them more free. The evangelists and other writers of the New Testament were genuine authors whose natural talents were enhanced and strengthened by grace.

The Bible is what we need in writing

The sacred authors, by divine inspiration, put into writing only those things which God wanted us to have in sacred literature. There is nothing missing from the Bible, nothing superfluous. There are no new books to come.

What is given is for our salvation

Because they were inspired by the Spirit of God, the books of the Bible teach solidly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into writing for the sake of our salvation. What we do not need for our salvation is not necessarily safeguarded from error.

The truth should be understood in a broad sense. It involves ideas, and it involves moral principles, but it also involves much more. The truth can be communicated in the emotions which a text can evoke; it can be in the beauty of a passage, or in the sheer drudgery of another. The truth can involve historical information which is necessary for our understanding of the Word of God (this does not necessarily mean exact dates and chronology.) What must be remembered is that the truth which is guaranteed by the inspiration of the Bible has to do with what we require for salvation.

God speaks in human language

To see clearly what God intended to say we must investigate what the human authors intended to

say. This principle shows how intimately the divine and human authors are united: what the human author says is what God wants to say.

We must attempt, then, to understand the human writers' way of communicating. We must study the language and the literary forms they used, the culture in which they lived, the history that was theirs.

The whole of Bible must be considered

Serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture. The human authors each wrote a part of the Bible; the Holy Spirit wrote it all. The content of the whole must guide our interpretation of any part.

The Gospels are pre-eminent

Everything in the Bible must be measured and interpreted in the light of the Gospel. The words and deeds of Jesus are the final Word of God. They are the measure. This is symbolised by our actions at Mass. We stand for the Gospel while we sit for the other readings.

The Living Tradition of the Church must be taken into account

From the one and same Church, inspired by the one and same Spirit, came both the New Testament and the living tradition of the whole Church. The word of God lives in both. When we speak of the living tradition of the Church, we are referring to convictions which have endured over the centuries throughout the People of God. The Church's constant teaching on moral and doctrinal matters, her way of worshipping the Lord and celebrating the holy mysteries of our faith, these form the "living tradition" which, along with the Scriptures, communicate the Word of God to mankind.

The Creeds are also to be used

The interpreter is also to take into account "the harmony which exists between elements of the faith" : Every truth of the faith is related to every other directly or indirectly. What we teach about human nature affects what we teach about grace; what we hold about the Eucharist speaks also about the Church; what we teach concerning Mary affects what we believe about Jesus, and so on. What a commentator writes about any passage or any book in the Bible must be judged by the effect it may have on the faith as a whole.

Conclusion

In the last analysis, the People of God are not a people of a book, but a people who have a book, the Bible. The People of God, the Church, has within it the service of authority to assist and guide it on the right path in the matter of interpreting the Bible. All interpretation, sooner or later, has to submit to the teaching authority which the Lord himself has given to his People. This does not put a straitjacket on the scholars; they can do all the research they are able to do, and probe every area of the Bible. When all their work is done, then it must be subjected to the scrutiny of the People of God in general and the judgement of the persons to whom God has given the responsibility of guiding the People in truth.

The guidance of the Church on the interpretation of the Bible is wise, intelligent, and freeing; it allows for both the work of humans and the work of God to come to the fore in his Word.

Appendix A

Bible Versions and Translations

We recommend that you use a Catholic version of the Bible. Since you will encounter many versions of the Bible we include this evaluation of the many of the versions that are available today.

Translations of the Bible - A General Note

What factors should we consider when choosing a translation of the Bible?

For one thing, as a practical matter, we want the translation to be presented in print that is easy-to-read, and in a binding that is sturdy. Most versions are available in paperback or in hardcover. You will pay more for a hardcover version, but it will last longer.

A second, and more important, concern is that the translation contain the whole of the Bible. Each religious group - whether Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox - decides for itself which books it considers to be inspired. So we first must decide which group we belong to, and then we accept as the Word of God those books which our group accepts.

The Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Churches all agree on which books make up the New Testament. And they agree on the basic make-up of the Old Testament. But they do not agree on whether seven Old Testament books are divinely inspired, and whether they belong in the Old Testament. These disputed books are commonly called the "Apocrypha" or "Deuterocanonical Books". They are 1 & 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom, and Baruch.

Protestant churches do not accept these books as inspired, because they are not found in the Hebrew Bible.

The Catholic Church does accept these books as inspired, because they are contained in the Greek version of the Bible that was used from the most ancient days of Christianity.

If you buy a translation that has been prepared by Catholics, you will get all the books of the Old Testament that the Catholic Church believes to be inspired. If you buy a translation that has not been prepared by Catholics, be sure to get an edition that includes the "Apocrypha" translated from the original languages (Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek), and we will want to be sure that the translators have used the most accurate versions of the original. We will also want to be sure that the translators have understood the original languages, and that they have accurately translated those languages into readable, clear English.

Some good translations are relatively literal. This means that, while trying to express the meaning of the original in readable English, the translators also try to reflect as much as possible the wording and style of the original.

Some good translations are relatively free. This means that the translator does not feel bound to translate the words of the original so much as the meaning expressed by the words. The translator first seeks to come to a full understanding of that meaning, and then asks: "How would the writer have said that if he had been writing in English, instead of in Hebrew or Greek?"

We can learn from both approaches - literal and free. In fact, it is good to compare a literal translation with a free one in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the meaning of any verse in the Bible.

Four translations you can trust

You can confidently use any one of the following versions as your main Bible. Each is a very good translation that makes use of modern biblical scholarship.

The Revised Standard Version With Apocrypha

New Testament: 1946, revised in 1971; Old Testament: 1952; Deuterocanonical Books (Apocrypha): 1957 - but the version is regularly revised.

The RSV is an excellent translation. It is somewhat literal, so the biblical imagery is kept fresh. It generally reads well, though at times the language is a bit stiff - a problem with all literal translations.

The best edition of the RSV is *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*. New York/Oxford, 1977.

The Jerusalem Bible (The New Jerusalem Bible)

Published in 1966, this is the English equivalent of *La Bible de Jerusalem*, though the translators followed the Hebrew and Greek.

It is a good solid translation that falls somewhere between the literal and the free. It contains good introductions to each book, lots of helpful notes, and an excellent cross-reference system.

The New Jerusalem Bible (1985) has been revised so extensively that it is almost a new translation.

NOTE: One of the chief reasons for using the Jerusalem Bible is to take advantage of its superb notes. Spend the extra money to buy the complete edition (whether paperback or hardcover); the **Reader's Edition contains the whole translation, but not all the notes.**

The New American Bible

This translation was prepared by members of the Catholic Biblical Association, at the request of the American Bishops. It was published in 1970.

The NAB is another fine translation that, falls somewhere between the literal and the free. It has some notes, though not as many as the Jerusalem Bible. A thorough revision of the New Testament was published in 1987.

The Good News Bible (Today's English Version) With Apocrypha

New Testament: 1966; Old Testament: 1976; Deuterocanonical Books (Apocrypha): 1979.

This is a relatively free translation, so in some cases the richness of the biblical poetic language has been lost. But it clearly expresses the meaning of the original in readable modern English. The judgments about meaning - so crucial a matter in a free translation - have been made by competent scholars. It contains striking line drawings. There are not many notes.

NOTE: Be sure to get an edition with the "Apocrypha".

A brief evaluation of other available versions (in alphabetical order)

Amplified Bible

This translation is hard to use. It offers a variety of possible meanings for certain words or phrases; the reader is left to choose.

The Book. See The Way. Common Bible

The Common Bible is an ecumenical edition of the Revised Standard Version, acceptable to Catholics, Protestants, and Greek Orthodox.

Douay-Rheims

New Testament: 1582; Old Testament: 1609. This is a translation of the ancient Latin translation used by the Church, the Vulgate. It is inaccurate in places, and its style is wooden. As it is based on the Vulgate, it contains the whole Bible. It was revised by Bishop Challoner in the 18th century, and was for many years the only English Bible available to Catholics. Fortunately, we now have many more accurate translations available, and ones which have been made from the original languages.

King James Version

Produced in 1611, The King James version is a literal translation. Unfortunately, the translators were working with faulty original texts (especially for parts of the New Testament). In addition, many words have changed meaning since 1611, and many are no longer part of the language. The translators did not have the benefit of the knowledge of ancient languages and literature gained in recent years.

This translation is famous for its classic English style. It should be read as a masterpiece of English literature, not as an accurate translation of the Bible. Note: It is possible to get the "Apocrypha" of the King James version.

A New King James version was published in 1979. This version only tinkers with some of the surface problems in the King James version (e.g. the old-fashioned language) and does not deal with the basic problems (e.g. the faulty original texts upon which the translation is based).

Knox Version

New Testament: 1949; Old Testament: 1955. This is a translation of the Latin Vulgate, in the light of the Hebrew and Greek originals. It was done by one man: Monsignor Ronald Knox, a master of English style, and a learned scholar of Greek and Latin. He was not so well versed in Hebrew.

This version is remarkable as a personal achievement, and is well worth reading. The translation of the letters of Paul is especially enlightening.

But this translation has several flaws. First of all, it is not a translation of the original languages, but of the ancient Latin translation. Secondly, Monsignor Knox was not a biblical scholar, and his translation does not reflect the deeper understanding of the meaning of the ancient languages which modern scholarship has provided. Finally, the translator's powerful English style is sometimes overwhelming; this can distract the reader and make it hard to get a sense of what the Biblical author is saying.

Living Bible. See The Way.

Modern Language Bible

This translation is hard to read because it follows the original languages too closely.

New American Standard Bible

Published in 1971, this is a conservative, literal translation that is used widely among some Evangelical Protestant groups. Its English style suffers because of the translators' desire to be literal.

New English Bible With Apocrypha

New Testament: 1961, revised 1970; Old Testament with Apocrypha, 1970.

The NEB is a somewhat free translation by good British scholars. It reads very well, with a slight British flavour to the language. The New Testament has often been praised for its clarity, and for the way in which it sheds light on the meaning of difficult passages.

Some biblical experts find fault with the NEB. They say that in certain places the Old Testament is not translated reliably.

New International Version

New Testament: 1973, revised 1978 and 1983; Old Testament without Apocrypha: 1978, revised 1983. This translation is the work of many scholars from a wide range of Protestant churches. It was initiated by the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals.

It is an accurate, literal translation, but it does not contain the whole Bible, and so should not be used as one's main Bible

New World Version

This is the Jehovah's Witness Bible. It is consistently inaccurate. The translators did not understand the meaning of the original, and they systematically insert Jehovah's Witness teachings into the text.

Phillips New Testament

This translation of the New Testament was first published in 1958, and revised in 1972. Uses good English, and makes interesting reading.

Reader's Digest Bible (Reader's Bible)

Published in 1982, this is a shortened version of the Revised Standard Version. The Old Testament has been reduced by about half, and the New Testament has been reduced by about one-quarter. This project was accomplished with skill and sensitivity under the direction of an excellent biblical scholar, Bruce Metzger.

This edition might be a good way to start into the Bible, but of course, it should not be used as a substitute for the complete Bible.

The Way (Also published under the name The Living Bible, and The Book).

Published in 1972, The Way is not a real translation, but a paraphrase, and an inaccurate one at that. Unfortunately, it reads well, so its mistranslations are effectively communicated.

It is not based on a study of the Hebrew and Greek text. It is simply a rewriting of an earlier English translation. In many places it distorts the meaning of the Word of God, since the translator simply was not able to translate the original text of Scripture, and allowed his personal religious views to affect his rendering of the Bible. Do not use *The Way*. *Today's English Version*. See *Good News Bible*.

Today's English Version. See *Good News Bible*.

BIBLE STUDY PROGRAMS

Discovering the Bible is a two-volume study program by Rev. John Tickle of the diocese of El Paso, Texas. It is simple and easy to use.

It does not provide commentaries to biblical texts. Rather, it presents and develops some important biblical themes from both the Old Testament and the New Testament perspective; this makes it possible to have the whole program in two small books.

Each study session consists of, a presentation of background material; a Scripture text to be read; discussion questions to help the group study and reflect on the texts; a prayer service to enable the group to pray and celebrate their discoveries.

Book One (1978)

Themes: Revelation, Election, Covenant, Law, Sin, Redemption, Messiah, and Love. Price: \$3.95 (U.S.).

Book Two (1980)

The themes covered in Book Two are: Community, Hospitality, Faith, Worship, Holiness, Justice, Suffering, Discipleship. Price: \$3.95 (U.S.).

There is a leader's guide available for each book, at a cost of \$3.95 each. These provide practical ideas for implementing this program.

Published by Liguori Publications, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, Missouri, U.S.A. 63057.
Telephone (314) 464-2500.

JOURNEY

JOURNEY was designed and written by Marcel Gervais, who is now Bishop of the Diocese of Sault Ste Marie, Ontario.

It consists of forty booklets, each of which covers one or more books of the Bible. It is designed for the small group discussion format, but it can be done by individuals.

This is a very complete package: it assigns readings from the Bible, and provides excellent commentary. It connects and develops themes as they occur in Scripture. It follows the order of the books in the Bible. Lessons 1 to 20 guide the reader through the most important parts of the Old Testament. Lessons 21 to 40 cover the New Testament.

Each lesson includes a Psalm to be used as an initial prayer to start meetings. Section objectives help the reader know what will be covered in each unit. Each unit also has practice questions that are useful for reviewing the material as well as providing new insights into the material covered. At the end of each lesson there is a Self-test. Answers to all test questions are given at the end

NOTE: This program is also available in French as *Montee* and in Chinese. It is now available in Spanish as *Travesia* and in thirteen other languages.

Little Rock Scripture Study Program

This course was begun in 1974 by a group of lay people, priests, and religious in the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas. The author of the study books is Father Jerome Kodell, O.S.B. The commentaries in each unit are taken from the Colledgeville Bible Commentary series, and are very good.

The program begins with a ten-week study of the Acts of the Apostles. This is a good approach because it situates the Scriptures within the Church. This can then be followed by similar studies on other parts of the Bible. Each unit takes ten to thirteen weeks.

Thus, a group can do only ten weeks on the Acts and stop, or it can proceed to another unit. One disadvantage is that the reader will not get a complete picture of the Bible unless he or she complete all the units, which takes quite a long time.

This program uses the small group discussion format as the primary learning technique but it also includes the lecture method. This makes it accessible to large groups who gather for the opening prayers and a formal lecture presentation by the pastor or a qualified leader. The participants can then break into small groups for sharing. Thus, the program offers a combination of individual study, lecture, prayer and sharing.

One of the features of this program is that it offers an intensive program of leadership training.

Audio and video cassettes are also available to assist the leaders in the preparation and presentation of material.

Published by: The Liturgical Press, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota U.S.A. 56321.
Telephone (612) 363!2213.

The cost of study material for participants is only \$5.25 U.S. for each unit, plus \$1.00 for the Answer Guide. Costs of audio and video cassettes are more substantial but should not be beyond the means of a parish.

NOTE: Some of the material is now available in Spanish.

Share the Word

Share the Word is a monthly publication written by Father Laurence EX. Brett. It provides a commentary on the Sunday readings.

This program can be used by small groups who want to meet weekly to study the Sunday readings. Video cassettes are available in which Father Brett offers additional input.

Published by: Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association, 3031 Fourth Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. U.S.A. Price: because Share the Word is supported by free will offerings, the booklets are mailed free of charge. The video cassettes cost \$24.95 per month.

Resources

Bible **Centre**, Archdiocese of Montreal. 2065 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3H 1G6. (No longer in operation)

Canadian Bible Society, National Office. 10 Carnforth Road, Toronto, Ontario, M4A 2S4.

Catholic Biblical Association of Canada. 80 Sackville Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5A 3E5.(Moved)

Guided Study Programs in the Catholic Faith. Box 2400, London, Ontario, N6A 4G3.(No longer in operation. Programs are now published by Emmaus Publicatons, see address in this website.)