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Reading an Entire Gospel

by Jerry Johnson, Capuchin

*(Have you ever read an entire Gospel within the course of a few days or a week?
Give it a try! It can be a spiritually moving experience.)*

Many people are accustomed to the Gospels and familiar with the many smaller units that we hear at our various Roman Catholic liturgies. However, each Gospel is an entire story unit. Sometimes, besides hearing each individual part in the context of a liturgy, it can also be really moving to read the entire story of a particular Gospel, to enter into the narrative world that it creates. Have you ever watched a movie and become so emotionally involved with the story that you almost forgot about the outside world? In the same way, entering into the narrative world of a particular Gospel either in one sitting (this might be too much), or over the course of a few days, one might become aware of elements of the Gospel message that would perhaps otherwise go unnoticed. Sometimes when we discern, God relates with us in subtle ways that may not be so obvious unless we make the effort to seek them out.

How long will this take?

Well, Mark is the shortest. It is about 34 pages in the New American Bible. Depending upon how fast a person reads, this might take 5 or 6 hours. The first time you go through, read the story carefully. Imagine yourself being there, but don't read all the footnotes; this could distract from the flow. After you finish the entire Gospel, go back and read it again, this time paying close attention to the footnotes. Then, read it again without the footnotes. Look for patterns in the story. How do you experience God's presence and healing as you read?

How should I start?

First of all, before you begin, take some time in quiet prayer asking to be lead to a more intimate relationship with God. As you read, keep in mind what you already know in your heart about God, how God fundamentally calls people to love and pray for one another and how God fundamentally loves people. Keeping this in mind will help you avoid misinterpretations.

What should I pay attention to as I read?

One of the most important things is to use your imagination and enter into the world of the particular Gospel. However, there are some skills that might sharpen your awareness of what the author is trying to say. Those skills would involve paying attention to the plot, the setting, the characters, and the style of writing. (We won't focus on this now, but a person should also eventually study how the day-to-day life and culture are different today than they were in the time of Jesus).

Plot: In the Gospel of Mark, part of the plot is trying to follow how the followers of Jesus waver. Sometimes they trust and understand Jesus. But as the story moves along, they experience more and more uncertainty and difficulty. What do *you* notice about the ebb and flow of the story?

Setting: Pay attention to the details of the surroundings in a particular scene of a story. For example, the first chapter of Mark takes place in the desert. Meditate on the significance of the desert in the Bible. It was the place where the Israelites came to know God. It was also a place of desolation, hardship and demons. Have you had intense times like this in your life? Times when you felt hardship but at the same time came to a renewed relationship with God?

Vocation Update

Characters: How complex is each character? Do they change over the course of a story? Do they have a good idea of what Jesus is all about? Sometimes in the Bible, contrast is used to highlight a character. For example, in Mk 4:35-41, compare the character of the disciples with the sleeping Jesus. What does this tell us about Jesus? The disciples?

Key Words: What are the key words that you notice keep appearing over and over again?

Key Phrases: Are there phrases that consistently appear at important times?

Motif: Is there an object or action that keeps reappearing? With Biblical narrative, repetition is extremely important.

Themes: In the Gospel of Mark, fear and misunderstanding seem to be a common trait of the disciples as they attempt to follow Jesus. **“They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went ahead of them. They were amazed, and those who followed were afraid” (Mk 10:32).** Do you ever feel anxiety about the future? Fear? Uncertainty? Well, you are not alone. In fact it seems to be a common trait of the followers of Jesus. This is not necessarily a bad thing; welcome to the human race. How does the central figure of our story, Jesus, seek to bring healing and hope into the lives of all the people he encounters? What themes do *you* notice as you read?

There are many ways that truth is conveyed in the Bible. Some of it is through story, poetry, history, parable, prophecy, law or the apocalyptic style of writing. By reading an entire Gospel and studying its plot, setting, characters, key words, key phrases, motif, and themes, we are really only experiencing one way to be enriched by the inspiration of the Bible. There are many other wonderful biblical study methods that can help us all “search out” for the layers of meaning in Sacred Scripture. In the end, God is seeking to deepen a relationship with us and for all of humanity to deepen their loving and just relationships with one another.

A fairly easy-to-read textbook on methods to interpret the Bible is *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, by W. Randolph Tate, Revised Edition, 2000.

Two fairly difficult to read but thorough documents on the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on the Sacred Scripture are:

Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965) This is available online.

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993) This is available online.

Reservations are required to attend the weekends.

New inquirers are welcome!

Contact Fr. John Holly 920-915-4400

jholly1953@yahoo.com or

Br. Jerry Johnson 773-475-6206

vocation@capuchinfranciscans.org

or visit www.CapuchinFranciscans.org and click on <How to Begin>

**Detroit Ministry Weekend
for Candidates and Inquirers
October 23-25 , 2009**

Visit the Solanus Casey Center and the many Capuchin Ministries. Meet the friars and people who work with them. Spend time in prayer. *See the Vocation Update from Nov. 28, 2008 for last year’s photos.*