

During graduate school I decided I would test my vocation to monastic life after getting my degree. And in November 1991, just days after finishing school, I did go up to Vermont, to the Carthusian monastery there, for a month-long retreat to see if that is where God wanted me. The Carthusians are very austere hermit monks. The hermits only leave their cells and see the other monks three times a day for liturgies. The rest of the day is spent in silent solitude.

In 1991 I was still rather new to the faith. I had returned to Catholicism only a few years earlier, and although I was serious about my discernment I was a beginner in prayer. And so when the Novice Master took me to my cell, showed me around, and then literally left me in silence, I didn't know what to do. What was I going to do for thirty days in my small cell in the middle of the green Mountains, snowed in by the Vermont winter? It occurred to me that I could go crazy like the Jack Nicholson character in The Shining.

So I asked for books! I already had a Bible in my cell, so the Novice Master brought me a large Bible Commentary. And for the next month I read the Bible cover to cover – even the genealogies – with the help of the commentary. That was the first scripture study I had ever done. I won't say that I had never read the Bible before. I had read bits and pieces. But, while I didn't have a call to be a hermit, that retreat was a blessing because it was my first sustained encounter with the Bible. And in this I think I was a fairly typical Catholic. I could tell you that my month-long immersion in scripture instantly changed my life, but that would not be true. But it did give me a confidence in, and insight into, God and my faith that I did not have before. And it was the beginning of much further study that continues up to today.

I want to speak to you about the Bible in today's homily because, thanks to a generous donor, after mass every family here will receive a new Bible from the parish. I suppose this could be seen by our Protestant friends as confirming their worst suspicions -- that Catholics don't even own Bibles let alone read them. But that's not why I'm giving the scriptures away. In fact, there is a wide spectrum in the Biblical literacy of this or any Catholic parish. There are some of you who can teach scripture, who can quote it, and who love it. And there are indeed some of you who don't yet own a Bible. And there is everything in between.

But I'm giving everyone a Bible because for too many of us the Bible is merely a "holy object" on a shelf or coffee table in the living room – big, beautiful -- and untouched and untouchable. The scriptures ARE holy – but they are not meant to be revered from afar. This is a book that is meant to be used.

Have you ever seen a child's doll that is too beautiful to be played with? It sits on a shelf admired but untouched. On the other hand have you seen a beloved doll that is carried about constantly by small dirty hands. It's taken outside as well as inside. But it's rumpled and ragged precisely because it is so well known and loved.

What do our Bibles look like – the first or second doll? That will tell us a lot about how much we love scripture. The Bibles you receive today are work Bibles, not living room Bibles. They are meant to be worn out. You have my permission, and commission, to underline in them, to take notes in them, to get them messy and ragged from reading and praying them.

How to use them? (If you're already set for Bibles – then give it away! A great evangelizing gift!) But I've begged you to pray 20 minutes a day. Take these Bibles to that prayer. And if you need help in understanding God's word – and we all do because God's word can only be fully understood in the midst of the Church community from which it came – we have two scripture studies starting in September. One is on Monday mornings reading Exodus. The other is on Monday evenings studying I and II Corinthians. These are great opportunities. I remember how enlightening that Bible commentary was for me in my monastery cell. There will be a registration table for the scripture studies in the narthex after mass. And the teachers will be speaking after communion. If you have never taken a scripture study please give it a try this year.

In addition, parishioner Charles Wadlow will be offering a Catholic Study Fellowship for all Catholics on the Eastside every other Thursday night at 7:00 at the Kirkland Women's club starting Sept. 16. This is not a year-long sustained study of one book of the bible. Rather, Charles takes one topic and one passage of scripture each night and teaches you the Catholic faith from it. This might be the answer for those who can't commit to every week. But bring your Bibles to the CSF too. (There will be flyers for CSF at the scripture study sign-up tables).

Too many Catholics don't understand the power in this book. The Catholic Church has two great secrets that are barely appreciated by us, her members. The first is the Eucharist. We know intellectually that God becomes physically present at each mass. And that we can be united to God in this sacrament. But we barely scratch the surface of the transforming power that is here. We don't make use of 99% of the grace of this communion.

But the other great secret is the Bible. Our Protestant friends may put us to shame in their love for scripture. But even they probably only take advantage of a small portion of what is available there. We average Catholics make even less use of the grace available from these words of God. And the tragedy is that this is OUR book! The Bible was put together by the Catholic bishops of the 2nd -- 4th centuries. It didn't fall from heaven. Led by the Holy Spirit, it was the Catholic bishops who decided which ancient documents were inspired and which were not. And their decisions created the Bible we have today. The Book you will have in your hands is the complete and true Word of God.

For Christians the most important thing in life is to know and love God. The most important ways to do this are through prayer, the scriptures, and the sacraments. All three are necessary to bring to completion the new life Christ offers to each of us. You don't have to be snow-bound in a monastery for a month to read the Bible. But you do have to commit to it. I'm asking you to take your Bible out of the plastic, or off the shelf, and let it give us the confidence in, and knowledge and love of, God that we all need to be Christ's Disciples.