

The following was included as part of a Christmas greeting from the Sacred Heart Justice and Peace Committee, Bayside, New York.

ADVENT

by Daniel Berrigan

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss

--This is true: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,

that whoever believes in him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction

-- This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever

-- This is true: For unto us a child is born, and unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder,

And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world

-- This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you, even unto the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church, before we can be peacemakers.

-- This is true: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young shall see visions,

and your old shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for the liberation of humanity, for justice, human dignity, and peace are not meant for this earth and for this history

-- This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice.

Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ -- the Life of the world.

From the Pax Christi, USA, Web site

On the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe
(Friday, December 12th is the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe)

God of power and mercy, You blessed the Americas at Tepeyac with the presence of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe. May her prayers help all men and women to accept each other as brothers and sisters. Through your justice present in our hearts may your peace reign in the world.

Mary, mother of the liberator:

Pray for us.

Mother of the homeless:

Pray for us.

Mother of the refugee and immigrant:

Pray for us.

Mother of the condemned:

Pray for us.

Mary, woman of mercy:

Empower us.

Woman of faith:

Empower us.

Woman of wisdom:

Empower us.

Woman of hope:

Empower us.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, we entrust our lives to you and to your son. May we too be pregnant with hope, trusting that the reign of your son will one day dawn and spill its radiance even in the darkest corners of the world. Teach us to live in unity, shelter us from despair, inspire us to act justly, to revere all that God has made. Root us ever more firmly in the peace of Jesus. Amen.

Pax Christi, USA, can be contacted at www.paxchristiusa.org/. You may want to consider a membership in this worthwhile organization.

The following is from the *Proslogion* of Saint Anselm, as found on the universalis.com Web site. It is a second reading from the Office of Readings during the first week of Advent.

Longing to see God

Little man, rise up! Flee your preoccupations for a little while. Hide yourself for a time from your turbulent thoughts. Cast aside, now, your heavy responsibilities and put off your burdensome business. Make a little space free for God; and rest for a little time in him.

Enter the inner chamber of your mind; shut out all thoughts. Keep only thought of God, and thoughts that can aid you in seeking him. Close your door and seek him. Speak now, my whole heart! Speak now to God, saying, I seek your face; your face, Lord, will I seek.

And come you now, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek you, where and how it may find you.

Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you when you are absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you present? Truly you dwell in unapproachable light. But where is unapproachable light, or how shall I come to it? Or who shall lead me to that light and into it, that I may see you in it? Again, by what signs, under what form, shall I seek you? I have never seen you, O Lord, my God; I do not know your face.

What, O most high Lord, shall this man do, an exile far from you? What shall your servant do, anxious in his love of you, and cast out far from your presence? He is breathless with desire to see you, and your face is too far from him. He longs to come to you, and your dwelling-place is inaccessible. He is eager to find you, but does not know where. He desires to seek you, and does not know your face.

Lord, you are my God, and you are my Lord, and never have I seen you. You have made me and renewed me, you have given me all the good things that I have, and I have not yet met you. I was created to see you, and I have not yet done the thing for which I was made.

And as for you, Lord, how long? How long, O Lord, do you forget us; how long do you turn your face from us? When will you look upon us, and hear us? When will you enlighten our eyes, and show us your face? When will you restore yourself to us? Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, reveal yourself to us. Restore yourself to us, that it may be well with us, yourself, without whom it is so ill with us. Pity our toilings and strivings toward you since we can do nothing without you.

Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me when I seek you, for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in longing, let me long for you in seeking; let me find you by loving you and love you in the act of finding you.

For those of you who pray the Prayer of the Church (Divine Office or Breviary), the following two sites can also be of great support.

<http://theanchoressonline.com/>

<http://divineoffice.org/>

From the Altnet.org Web site, the following article, from the *Tribune Star News*, continues the story of Father Ray Bourgeois.

A Catholic Priest is About to be Excommunicated -- Guess Why
By Stephanie Salter

The place: Heaven's gate.

The time: Around 2028, give or take a few mortal years.

The scene: A large crowd of newly dead, not yet liberated from their earthly forms, is trying to maintain order despite a cluster of men who shout, wag their fingers and, occasionally, shove.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! For pity's sake, please!" one of the non-combative people in the crowd cries out. "What in God's name has you behaving in such an unholy way?"

A man whose body is of average size, but whose essence emanates a royal purple aura, whirls around with a contemptuous look. Pointing to another man, also of ordinary physical dimension, but whose aura seems made of sunlight, the angry man barks:

"What is he doing here? He has no right whatsoever to stand among us at the gates of heaven. Don't you know? He was excommunicated!"

The non-combative person, who is long-limbed and thin, appears to be male, but he has an androgynous quality that sets him apart from the others.

"You mean he's Roman Catholic, and he so offended the church leadership that he was officially denied the sacrament of Communion?" the gentle man asks.

"Correct!" booms the purple-aura man.

"What did he do?" the quiet man asks. "Was he among the thousands of mentally sick Catholic clergy who sexually abused children? Was he among the hierarchy who knew of these men's illness but, in the name of protecting the church, continued to assign them to parishes and contact with more children?"

The purple-aura man grows more purple. In a low voice, heavy with fury, he responds: "He was indeed a priest. His name is Roy Bourgeois. But his excommunication had nothing to do with that unfortunate subject."

The non-combative man smiles broadly and embraces Bourgeois.

"Father Roy!" he exclaims. "I know of you. Your tireless efforts to bring peace and justice to the oppressed of Latin America are legendary among good people of many faiths. Your courage in non-violent protest of the military training facility known as the School of the Americas is much admired."

Bourgeois bows his head.

"Thank you," he says, humbly. "I became a Maryknoll priest in 1972 after I was in combat in Vietnam. I served for 36 years until ..."

The quiet man asks, "What did you do to warrant the ultimate deprivation of Christ's body and blood in Communion?"

Father Roy sighs and answers, "I concelebrated a religious ceremony with a woman priest. I publicly advocated the ordination of women priests. I refused to recant my belief that God calls women and men to priesthood and that Catholic teaching to the contrary was wrong and unsupported by Scripture."

At this, the purple-aura man explodes: "I am a cardinal, the head of the Vatican office that warned Roy Bourgeois in 2008 to recant or face excommunication!"

"You were," the thin, non-combative man says.

"Were what?" the purple-aura man snaps.

"You were a cardinal and the head of an important Vatican office," the quiet man says. "Your earthly life is over. You're just another soul here, waiting to pass through the gates of heaven. All wait regardless of their mortal status: Catholic popes, Anglican archbishops and Episcopal bishops, directors of the mighty Southern Baptist Convention, television evangelists, pastors of mega-churches. And the admission criteria are deeds, not job titles."

A man who hasn't spoken but who had been among the arguing, shoving cluster steps toward the thin, androgynous man. He, too, emits a purplish aura, but it is more violet than royal.

"What do you know about Anglicans?" he says, with noticeable irritation.

"I know some of them in the Episcopal province of the church pulled away from the Anglican Communion about the same time Father Roy got into trouble," the quiet man says. "Four bishops in the United States and thousands of U.S. and Canadian laypersons, formed their own province, the Anglican Church of North America. Their objections centered around ordination of homosexuals and church blessings of same-sex unions."

The quiet man continues: "As I recall, two of the bishops also shared the Catholic hierarchy's prohibitive view of women priests, even though the Episcopalian Church had been ordaining women since 1976. Funny, if only Father Roy had been Episcopalian. He would have been celebrated by most of his church instead of excommunicated. Aren't religious rules fascinating?"

The violet-aura man looks as if he's been slapped.

"Rules?!" he fumes. "We are talking about morality. God's will. How dare you trivialize that by calling it 'rules'?"

The thin, quiet man raises his hand in reconciliation.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I meant no offense. By chance, were you one of the dissenting bishops?"

The violet-aura man nods.

“Did you also agree with some of your fellow dissenters that women never should have been ordained in the Episcopal Church?” the quiet man asks.

“No, I did not,” says the violet former bishop. “The bishop who presided over the entire U.S. Episcopal Church in 2008 was a woman. She did a perfectly fine job.”

The thin, gentle man mumbles, “rules,” turns back to Bourgeois and asks, “Father Roy, what did you tell the Vatican when you were given 30 days to recant?”

Bourgeois pulls three sheets of paper from the breast pocket of his coat and says, “This is my letter.”

The quiet man takes them and begins to read to himself. Tears well in his eyes. He says to the crowd, “Listen,” and reads aloud.

He quotes Bourgeois’ citation of a 1976 report, commissioned by the Vatican and conducted by Scripture scholars who found “there is no justification in the Bible for excluding women from the priesthood.” He reads Bourgeois’ question, “Who are we, as men, to say to women, ‘Our call is valid, but yours is not?’ Who are we to tamper with God’s call?”

His voice rising, the thin, gentle man reads on: “Sexism, like racism, is a sin. And no matter how hard or how long we may try to justify discrimination, in the end, it is always immoral.”

The recitation continues, of Bourgeois’ process of “prayer, reflection and discernment,” the compulsion of his conscience “to do the right thing,” and of the realization through his social justice struggles that there “will never be justice in the Catholic Church until women can be ordained.”

The thin, quiet man finishes reading, presses Bourgeois’ letter to his own heart and, finally, hands it back to the former priest.

“Look,” he says, pointing to the gates. “They open for you, Father Roy.”

Bourgeois seems overwhelmed. He moves toward heaven, then stops abruptly.

“Wait a minute,” he says. “I just realized. There are only men in this crowd. Please, don’t tell me heaven is as sexist as mortal life?”

The thin, quiet man actually chuckles. “No, no, Father Roy,” he says. “Most of the women are already inside.”

From America magazine, the following editorial addresses what American Catholics who are committed to the sanctity of life can realistically hope to accomplish during Barack Obama’s presidency.

The Art of the Possible

December 15, 2008

Next month will mark the 36th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the flawed U.S. Supreme Court decision that overturned most laws restricting abortion in America. The official anniversary will be Jan. 22, two days after another historic milestone, the inauguration of Barack Obama as the nation's 44th president. These two events should provoke serious national reflection on how to address the tragedy of abortion in this country, which Pope John Paul II rightly characterized as an affront to the dignity of the human person, undermining the very fabric of society.

While access to abortion is protected by judicial fiat, there are several strategies the new president could employ that would reduce the number of abortions. He could appoint justices to the U.S. Supreme Court committed to the sanctity of human life and to a more reasonable and moral view of the right to privacy than the one expressed in *Roe*. He could keep in place the restraints on abortion imposed by executive order during the George W. Bush administration. He could veto the [Freedom of Choice Act](#), in the event that it reaches his desk, and he could fight any effort to repeal the Hyde Amendment, the federal law that bars the use of federal funds to pay for abortions.

Mr. Obama should do all of these things. He is not likely, however, to do any of them. That is political reality. Though pro-life activists should not exempt the new president from moral suasion, nor abandon efforts to end access to abortion by all legal and moral means, they must realize that Mr. Obama is not at all likely to pursue policies that several committed pro-life presidents like Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush were either unwilling or unable to adopt themselves.

Instead of bemoaning this fact, pro-life activists should take seriously Mr. Obama's promise to find ways of reducing abortions short of outlawing them. This approach may be both prudent and morally justified. As the U.S. Catholic bishops have noted, "sometimes morally flawed laws already exist. In this situation, the process of framing legislation to protect life is subject to prudential judgment and 'the art of the possible.'"

The prudent question that pro-life advocates should pose is, What could we ask Mr. Obama and a Democratic Congress to do that they might actually do? Given that the abortion rate, according to the pro-choice Guttmacher Institute, among women living below the federal poverty level is more than four times that of women living 300 percent or more above the poverty level, pro-life activists could work with Congress and the president to provide low-income women with health care, childcare, housing, services for disabled children and other basic supports young women especially need.

Pro-life activists could also insist on a review of federal and state welfare policies to ensure that they do not indirectly encourage abortions. This is especially important in light of the fact that there may be a correlation between the existence of state caps on children eligible for economic assistance and an increased incidence of abortion. Advocates could also work with the president and Congress to increase federal funding for adoption services and comprehensive, morally acceptable sexuality education and crisis pregnancy centers, as well as support for programs to curb domestic violence and sexual abuse. All of these efforts are required by a culture that values life. As John Paul II noted, "It is not enough to remove unjust laws.... For this reason there need to be set

in place social and political initiatives capable of guaranteeing conditions of true freedom of choice in matters of parenthood.”

Mr. Obama, in turn, has an ethical obligation to work with pro-life activists and others to address the problem. Aside from his moral duty to protect the unborn, the new president also made a campaign promise. During his acceptance speech last summer at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Mr. Obama pledged to bring people together across traditional political divisions, adding that “we may not agree on abortion, but surely we can agree on reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies in this country.” The new president should honor this commitment by engaging in a serious, sustained dialogue with pro-life advocates, recalling that his mandate for change does not necessarily reflect a national consensus on every issue, let alone the most divisive ones.

Over one million abortions were performed last year in the United States; over 45 million have been performed since 1973. These statistics assail the conscience of the country. We must act now to reduce seriously the number of abortions and unwanted pregnancies in the United States by seizing the current moment of national unity engendered by Mr. Obama’s historic victory.

To subscribe to America magazine, write or call: America Press Inc., 106 West 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10019, (212) 581-4640.

I am pleased to be included in many ongoing conversations promoted by my friend, a retired Redemptorist priest. Since I have not obtained permission from all of the participants to quote them, I will merely use their initials. If they wish credit for their comments, I will revise these excerpts in the future. These comments were prompted by a presentation at the July Convention of a number of Church reform groups including the Federation of Christian Ministries.

J.,

Sorry I will not be there tomorrow to discuss this. At the July Convention of FCM, Corpus, and [the] WOC in Boston, I attended a workshop on the 2011 Meeting of the laity in the American Church. It was supposed to be run by Robert Blair Kaiser, but he was sick, so Eugene Bianchi led it. It was a lively discussion in which almost nobody was interested in defying the hierarchy and becoming an apostate Church. But some, like married priests thirty years ago, were looking for recognition from the Bishops, but we soon convinced them (especially the women priests) that that was never going to happen. Instead, most of us simply wanted to encourage the laity to follow Vat II, and simply follow their own consciences and work silently within the Church, ignoring the Bishops, and getting on with our lives and our ministry in whatever way we could serve. Some might say that this amounts to a schism, but most wanted to just ignore whatever excommunications or decrees that the Bishops cared to give out. The Bishops need us much, much more than we need them, and we should just go about our business and ignore them.

S.

B.,

I am forwarding this splendid response to everybody on my list. I am glad that you mentioned Kaiser's idea of an American Catholic patriarchate. Eugene Bianchi mentioned it in Boston in July, and there were no takers on the idea for precisely the reason you mentioned. What the hell do we do with the hierarchy? And why do we need another little Pope, like an American Patriarch? Quite obviously, what we need is a quiet underground revolution among the informed laity who are willing to take Vat II and run with it and ignore the Bishops. I can see immediately the opposition asking: how could a Catholic revolution in the US be quiet with the media frenzy that is instantly created by the 24-hour electronic media? I was thinking of something like the Obama campaign, which generated \$750 million to get our first African-American president elected. I believe that it was not the money per se that swung the election, but it was the involvement of millions of people who had never been directly involved before by actually making a contribution of any kind. I also think that it was the Internet especially that sparked all the rest: the mailings, the media blast. How can we use the Internet to get millions of American Catholics involved in creating a Church which is OUR Church and not the hierarchy's?

I am sure that the Convention of 2011 is a great strategy for reforming the American Church, but before it can happen, we have to get millions involved via the Internet in believing that it really is OUR CHURCH, AND THAT WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO BRING IT BACK TO CHRIST.

Any takers? Any martyrs? Any prophets? What we don't need is priests, whether celibate or married, male, female, or gay. We need Baptized Catholics who have made an adult commitment to being the Body of Christ on earth. Jesus hated priests; why have we spent 2000 years creating "other Christs" as priests when Jesus did not want to be a priest, did not want a clerical class, did not want his disciples "lording" it over their fellow believers ... He wanted a lay society, an egalitarian, communitarian society. The institutional Church was founded by the Roman Emperor and took over as the secular power (the papal states), when the government collapsed. ...
S.

Dear S.,

I know few Catholics who would disagree with the statement: the American Catholic church is a mess. Their responses span a spectrum: on the far left many have left the Church and joined other churches, or they have simply given up on organized religion all together; in the middle are the many who are distressed and upset but don't know how to change the situation, so they just keep on going to church and hoping that someone will do something to change things; on the far right are those who put the blame on Vatican II for fouling the religious waters and who excoriate those who dare to defy the hierarchy as they and the bishops try mightily to turn back the religious clock to the certainties of the Tridentine church.

I look for another response, one coming from a subsection of either the far left or the middle. These responders must, at least, be willing to stick with the church enough to challenge it. How? In the first place, they must give up any notion that the hierarchy will change anything if left to their own ... We have, in my opinion, the worst group of bishops in American Church history. Collectively, they don't lead. Instead, they follow like submissive sheep after the Vatican apparatchiks. They have given up their task of ruling, governing, and sanctifying their people in order to maintain themselves in power and accumulate dignities that they can show off among themselves (can you imagine wanting or accepting being made a medieval cardinal?!). Secondly, they must assume the burden of searching out new directions for the Church. This means both prayer and study. They cannot look to co-opted church professionals to do anything but support

the current strategies of *romanita* ... Thirdly, change will come through them and those who think like them and are willing to struggle with them. The educated and determined laity hold the key to change. Lastly, one of two strategies will work. The first is one of passive resistance: no more vocations from our families, no more serving on the window-dressing parish committees, no more money in collection plates, no more accepting nonsense from the pulpit or the chancery or the Vatican just because "Father says." The second strategy is an activist one. It demands organizing, organizing, and organizing. The proposed American Catholic Council fits that strategy.

A system changes substantially in three ways: 1) By being confronted with another system that is better than it and that can draw allegiance from the other to itself (if I knew of a church that was any better than Catholicism I'd join it, but I don't. And I'm not into founding churches!); 2) By a rebellion that overwhelms the existing church structures and replaces them with one's own (this is Bob Kaiser's strategy of turning the American Church into an independent patriarchate independent of Rome - he hasn't faced the question about who would be patriarch and what he would do with the present feckless cadre of bishops); 3) By a revolution instigated by members of a church who are still identified with it but who are free from its power. If they can get the system shook up enough, the reigning powers, afraid for their lives and positions, will look frantically about the system for help. The revolutionaries must be there, and must be there with a realizable plan.

B.

Any thoughts or comments that you would like to add to these observations would be appreciated.

Also from the discussion in Boston, the following comment, which leads in to the next article.

When one of the day's participants expressed a fear he'd wasted his ministry's best years in pursuit of a reform which is on the verge of being forgotten, Fr. John Dietzen shared a hopeful observation. The syndicated columnist reminded us, "The Eucharist is still in English. And as long as it is, our people will hear God's word as it was originally intended to be heard. That means there's always a chance for reform."

Our sacred authors couldn't agree more.

From America magazine, December 8, 2008.

Literate Church
The state of Catholic Bible study today
By David Gibson

For more than 40 years, the Rev. Roger V. Karban of the Diocese of Belleville has loved the Scriptures, studying them deeply, preaching on them weekly and teaching about them in popular Bible study groups. So galvanized was Father Karban by the Second Vatican Council's encouragement of Scripture study that he even started assigning Bible readings as penances, a practice he continues to this day. Yet for all of that hard work

and the efforts by the wider church—continuing with the recent Synod of Bishops on the Word of God (Oct. 5-26)—Father Karban can still come across to Catholics like the fellow in the confessional who balked when Father Karban tried to hand out his usual Scripture-based penance.

“Father,” the man complained, “I used to be a Protestant, and I became a Catholic so I wouldn’t have to read that book!”

Alas, while much has changed since Vatican II, some traditions die hard. Chief among them appears to be the old saw that Catholics “don’t read the Bible”—a hoary Reformation-era aphorism, but one that too many Catholics themselves still accept. “I find a lot of people who are still brainwashed that Scripture is for Protestants—that we Catholics don’t need that at all,” Karban says.

Then again, Catholics can take some solace in two developments, one less praiseworthy than the other.

On the downside, surveys show that Catholics are hardly alone in their struggle for biblical literacy. While American Christians proudly cite the Bible as their favorite book (93 percent own one, usually the King James version) and two-thirds see it as the source for answers to “all or most of life’s basic questions,” they actually do not know or understand much of what is written between the covers.

Only half of U.S. adults, for example, could name a single Gospel, and most do not know the name of the first book of the Bible. Even those sola scriptura Protestants who intimidate Catholics with chapter-and-verse recitations are not doing too well. According to a survey conducted in 2000, 60 percent of evangelicals said Jesus was born in Jerusalem, not that “little town of Bethlehem.” And despite all our bitter battles over posting the Ten Commandments, six in 10 Americans cannot name five of them, while half of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married. When a USA Today article on Stephen Prothero’s 2007 book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t*, was titled, “Americans Get an ‘F’ in Religion,” the eminent historian of religion, Martin E. Marty, quipped that the newspaper could be guilty of grade inflation.

Moreover, while fewer believers know much about the Bible, one-third of Americans continue to believe that it is literally true, something organizers of the Synod on the Word of God called a dangerous form of fundamentalism that is “winning more and more adherents...even among Catholics.” Such literalism, the synod’s preparatory document said, “demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research.”

Positive Trends in Bible Study

Pointing to the deficiencies of other Christians is not a comfort to Catholic leaders or even a respectable defense in backyard arguments with Protestant neighbors. But on the positive side, Catholics can also point to several promising initiatives and trends.

One is the growing number of reliable and readable books that can provide an introduction to Scripture study and a counter-current in the sea of speculative material available. Works ranging from the widely praised book *How Do Catholics Read the*

Bible? by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., to Garry Wills's series of primers (including *What the Gospels Meant* and *What Paul Meant*) to the recent *Jesus of Nazareth*, by Pope Benedict XVI, are just a few examples. Several educators have recommended the introduction to *Jesus of Nazareth* as a solid starting point for Scripture study. Scholars like Pheme Perkins (her *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction* remains a standard text) and Dianne Bergant, C.S.A. (*People of the Covenant: An Invitation to the Old Testament*, for example) bring both a woman's perspective and deep research.

Moreover, the Internet is a portal to vast amounts of quality material, including lectures by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., one of the most respected and accessible Bible scholars of the past generation.

Yet the heart of good Bible study—defined as close reading that leads to a deeper and more mature spirituality—is the small group, and in that field the Little Rock Scripture Study series remains the leader. The Little Rock series began in 1974 as a modest program for Catholics in central Arkansas as a way, as the co-founder Abbot Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., put it, to help reawaken biblical studies and spirituality in the Catholic Church, “which had been subdued and muted for four hundred years as a result of polemics of the Reformation period.” In fact, equipping the relatively small Catholic community to interact better with the region's dominant Bible-quoting Protestants was another spur to founding the program.

The response was overwhelming, and a decade later the program had gone national. Today, according to L.R.S.S. director Cackie Upchurch, the program has been used in more than 7,000 parishes in every U.S. diocese and in 55 countries around the world. Ms. Upchurch said there has been an encouraging spike in interest in their programs recently, owing to news of the pope's book on Jesus along with an unexpectedly strong interest in the ongoing Pauline Year. The Synod on the Word of God may help, too, she added. The growing number of lay ministers is also key in developing programs like Bible study that appeal to parishioners. “Bible study should be at the center of what we do in our parishes,” Ms. Upchurch said.

Paradoxically, the scandal of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy may also have prompted some Catholics to explore the Bible in depth for the first time in their lives, because the crisis revealed not only tragic sins by the clergy, but also a lack of basic religious education among an American laity that thought it should know better. Since 2004, *Voice of the Faithful*, the lay reform group that sprang up in response to the scandal, has posted resources for Bible study on its Web site, including a guide for a seven-session study of the early church. The goal is not one-stop scholarship, but a first step on the path to developing small groups, said Donna B. Doucette, executive director of V.O.T.F.: “If your ambition is to increase the voice and responsibility of the laity, then your responsibility is to understand the church you are trying to reform. We never approached our religion as something we needed to study. We approached it as something we needed to experience.” Doucette said there has been “no great stampede” for the V.O.T.F. package, “but those who find it, like it.”

Some wonder whether, like Catholic social teaching, Scripture scholarship is becoming one of the church's best-kept secrets. There is a good argument to be made that modern biblical scholarship, begun as a Protestant enterprise, has in the last half-century seen Catholic thinkers emerge as the most respected and readable Scripture scholars. Catholics who discover this trove respond enthusiastically. Father Karban recalled that

he began his first parish Bible study in 1966 as a class on the coming reforms in liturgy; but as often happens, once participants started talking about the biblical roots of the Mass, no one wanted to stop. The liturgy class never started, but Father Karban still leads three Bible classes a week at a parish, a hospital and a high school—some 30 people on Sunday nights, several dozen regulars on Tuesday mornings and another 15 to 20 on Thursday evenings. He also teaches a popular weekly class at a local community college.

Given such obvious interest, what are the obstacles to a more biblically literate church? Lack of public awareness about good programs and their limited availability at the parish level are two. Another is the time crunch and multiplying distractions that impinge on every aspect of life. For example, Charles McMahon, a retired professor of physics at the University of Pennsylvania, says he has been engrossed in Bible study since he retired in 2001, learning largely through lectures by Father Brown on compact disc. But three years ago, when Mr. McMahon tried to organize a Bible study at the twinned parishes he attends in Philadelphia, just six people showed up, and only three or four—out of hundreds of families on the parish rolls—made it through the seven-week course. “Finding time to sit down and do serious reading is just too difficult,” Mr. McMahon said. “If this is going to be done, we’re going to have to teach kids in high school and college. The level of knowledge about the New Testament, the Old Testament and church history is about a millimeter deep. We’re incredibly ignorant—myself, everyone.”

That lack of expertise can also constrain those able to devote time to Bible study. Ironically, as the church has emphasized Bible study, many Catholics hate to admit that they have been attending church all their lives but do not know much about the Scriptures. Then when they do open the Bible, they often treat it like any other book, and start at the beginning, rather than with, say, the Gospels. Few get beyond the story of the flood early in the Book of Genesis and the tide of “begats” that follows. “When I was growing up as a Catholic we were really told not to read the Bible because we could not understand it, and that it was too complex for us to understand,” Ms. Upchurch said. “And while it’s true that there is a lot of complexity, the same human dimensions are always there. And we have tools to help us bridge the gap between the 21st century and the second century.”

The flip side of this embarrassment is the presumption among many Catholics that they “get” the Bible at Mass, along with everything else they need for their spiritual lives. The postconciliar revolution in liturgy greatly expanded the readings, with a three-year cycle in the vernacular that for the first time included Old Testament passages. Given that exposure, many think they do not need anything else. As Mr. McMahon put it, “The majority still say you go to Mass, you get your ticket punched, and that’s it for the week.”

Certainly, the Mass could be a more effective starting place for Bible study, and Father Karban and others in formation work echo the concern expressed at the Vatican synod that priests need to learn Scripture better so that they can deliver better, more “biblical” homilies. Father Karban cited a recent survey that found seminarians are actually getting less Scripture today than in the 1930s, when modern biblical study was just emerging. Indeed, Father Karban says some of his most devoted students are themselves priests who want to learn more. Many laypeople would likely second Father Karban’s point. “How many times do I need to hear about the mustard seed? I got it. It fell on fallow ground,” Fox television host Bill O’Reilly complains in his essay in a new collection of interviews by Kerry Kennedy, *Being Catholic Now*. “But every year I’ve got to listen to

the guy tell me about the mustard seed. My 3-year-old's got it. Okay, take it, apply it to what we're doing, how we're living."

On the other hand, better homilies would still be a beginning, not the end of the journey. Deeper study provides the necessary context, and study groups should be led by a good facilitator who uses quality materials. Experts agree that a poorly led Bible study can be worse than none at all—a scavenger hunt for proof texts to support belief or win arguments rather than a search for faith and wisdom.

The Living Word of God

A final paradox is that the prospect of studying the Bible can induce anxiety among both lay believers and the hierarchy over where such exploration could lead. Studying the Bible can raise questions about church history and the tenets of faith. And too many leaders of study groups hesitate to engage or encourage such questions, because they fear either they do not have the answers or they will not be believed. Father Karban says that while he has never in 40 years known anyone whose beliefs have been undermined by Bible study, he still encounters those who think "that I'm going to come up with something that's going to destroy their faith."

Bible study may unsettle and even provoke. In a sense, the Bible is a dangerous book that grows more challenging with each reading. As Mark Twain said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

Cackie Upchurch likes that quotation. The Bible is a source of comfort, yes, and it should give us courage. But, she added: "It should also disturb us. It should also stir us into action. And if it's not doing those things, and if it's just in our heads, then I do not think we're doing justice to the living Word of God.... If you read this stuff and really believe it, you might have to change how you live."

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