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Reading the Bible with the eye of the soul

Michael Leach | Jan. 15, 2013 Soul Seeing

"With you leading, I entered inside myself, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw above that eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light." -- St. Augustine, Confessions 7:10

My great-uncle Barney was a bigtime salesman for Boeing in the 1950s. Adults in our working-class families talked about him with the kind of reverence Willy Loman had for his brother, Ben, who went to Alaska with only "a smile and a shoeshine" and came back rich. When Uncle Barney talked, even nephews had to listen.

Uncle Barney, a Protestant, was interested in religion as well as airplanes and was puzzled why his teenage nephew was studying to become a priest. "Michael," he asked one night at a dinner table, "why do you depend on the pope to tell you what the Bible means? Why don't you just let God speak to you directly?"

"It's like this," I explained. "The pope and the church were given the keys to the kingdom of heaven by Jesus so there would be no confusion on what the Bible really means. If everybody could just say what something meant, there would no absolute truth. Two different things can't be true at the same time."

Apologetics is a nasty business. Uncle Barney held his ground. I held the church's and blinded him with polemical dust. Now I'm as old as he was then and read the Bible the way he did, listening for God's voice inside me, no in-betweeners.

Sorry, Uncle Barney. You deserved better.

Here is what I know now: There is more than one way to look at anything. And two things can be true at the same time. Look at the illustration of Rubin's vase. What do you see? A vase? Two faces? Which is real, which is true?

We can read the Bible through the lens of doctrinal teaching and we can read the Bible through the eye of the soul, spiritually, and let it speak to us where we are.

We can read the passage, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19) to support the authority of the hierarchy to interpret the Bible, to make dogma, to absolve sins. Many Catholics find spiritual assurance by reading the Bible through the lens of church teaching.

Other Catholics prefer to read the Bible spiritually and let God speak directly to them. We don't have to deny a traditional interpretation to read a passage another way. It's like looking at Rubin's vase: What we see is what presents itself. What we focus on depends on what we are interested in.

Most Catholics have no interest in either denying or affirming the church's interpretation of Scripture. They are interested in learning what they need to know, "such as they are," to experience the kingdom of heaven that the

Bible says is "at hand" (Matthew 3:2), "inside" (Luke 17:21), and "a treasure hidden in a field" (Matthew 13:44). When we read the Bible with the eye of the soul, without preconception, and listen for the "still small voice" of God within (1 Kings 19:12), we may even discover a whole new way to understand Matthew 16:19.

We may see the kingdom of heaven not as a future place but as an eternal spiritual awareness. We may see that the text also suggests that if we are more interested in earthly goods and pleasures than in spiritual values, our invalid values will block our awareness of love and cover the now-hidden treasure of peace. We may understand that this is what we suffer from, and become more interested in wisdom and harmony than materialism or sensualism. We may come to appreciate that Jesus has given us each the keys to the kingdom of heaven, spiritual insights that loosen the plaque of ignorance from our consciousness and bind us instead to love, harmony and grace. We may even be inspired to read more scripture and over time "grow in wisdom and in grace" (Luke 2:52) as Jesus did.

Mary Sperry, associate director for utilization of the New American Bible at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, gives 10 good suggestions for fruitful reading of the Bible. Her ninth makes the perfect vase: "The Bible is not addressed only to long-dead people in a faraway land. It is addressed to each of us in our own unique situations. When we read, we need to understand what the text says and how the faithful have understood its meaning in the past. In light of this understanding, we then ask: What is God saying to me?"

More: Read all 10 [1] of Mary Sperry's suggestions for fruitful reading of the Bible.

[Michael Leach shepherds Soul Seeing for *NCR* and is the author of *Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question*, which the Catholic Press Association voted the best Popular Presentation of the Catholic Faith in 2012.]

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