

SUNDAY CATECHISM / 10

Interpretation of the Scriptures

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Sunday Catechism



The interpretation of the scriptures is the subject of the tenth lesson. A fundamental point to start with is this: if God is the main author of the Scriptures and man the secondary author - but is also the true author - then the interpretation of the sacred text must "tune in" with the two authors who wrote it.

What does this mean?

As we know there is an author of the sacred Scriptures, the so-called hagiographer, or sum of several authors, the search for the meaning of the Scriptures as desired by the author and by his contribution to the text, is both legitimate and essential. To understand what the author meant opens up many fields of investigation: linguistic and philological skills, inquiring into the context of the rabbinic tradition, the historical context, archeology, the study of the literary genre and a series of other factors. All these are important for the discovery of the author's intent in order to discover the literal sense of the Scriptures which is its fundamental meaning.

Why is the literal sense fundamental?

It might not be the most important, but it is fundamental because it is the foundation of the **spiritual meaning** of the Scriptures. In fact to investigate the author's intention means to investigate the foundation of the meaning of the Scriptures.

Attention! This serves as a warning and will be the subject of future study: when we speak of the literal sense, this is not a meaning devoid of theological value.

A certain historicistic and rationalistic approach to the Scriptures led to the idea that the only possible, agreed, true meaning of the Scriptures is the literal one, understood as devoid of its proper theological content and devoid of supernatural elements. This is an example: think of what happened with the abolition of prophecy or the miracle, discovering the literal sense meant stripping the text of any supernatural element.

Since God is the main author, its interpretation extends to a spiritual meaning.

The literal sense opens up to something more than its immediate meaning, to a fuller and deeper significance that must necessarily be investigated when reading the Scriptures born of faith, because the Holy Scriptures are a text that is born in the context of faith in order to transmit the faith. An approach to the scriptures without faith is unacceptable.

This literal sense is therefore fundamental and responds to that truth of faith which tells us that God is the principal author of the Scriptures and therefore **through** the hagiographer and the literal sense, God also says something more.

If you take the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 115-119, it explains what is meant by the various meanings of Scripture. It is reported in the medieval couplet, also referred to in the 2010 apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini* by Benedict XVI, most likely attributable to Augustine of Dacia (around 12th century); this couplet lists the 4 meanings of the Holy Scriptures: a literal one and then a tripartite division of

the spiritual meaning.

"Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegory, / moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia".

"The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith; The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny. "

Another fundamental text is taken from the *Theological Sum* of St. Thomas, the first part, quaestio prima, article 10.

" The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it."

This means that since the author of the Holy Scriptures is God, we cannot interpret that book as if it were only the work of human authorship, seeking only the literal or historical meaning of the text by conducting an investigation which makes use of all the various disciplines that have laudably developed over time. Since the main author is God, God does not act like mankind who use words to express corresponding realities. He is able to use those realities expressed by words to indicate another reality.

For example, the literal meaning of the account of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, invites us to investigate what the sacred author meant, but the spiritual meaning also tells us that not only did God intervene through Moses to save His people, telling him to cross the Red Sea and then overwhelms the pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, but God uses this episode to express another Passover, found in another passage which is clearly that of the Passover of the Lord. We celebrate this transposition liturgically.

The spiritual sense, that is a reality that indicates another reality, is possible only because God, the author of the Scriptures, is the same God who is also the lord of history and the author of creation. This passage - from one reality to another reality - is based on the literal sense, which takes us from the word to reality.

From word to reality = literal sense

From reality to another reality = spiritual sense

St. Thomas continues:

" Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (Confess. xii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses."

The search for the *sensus plenior* of the Scriptures as a whole is a principle absolutely rooted in the tradition of the Church, especially in patristic exegesis. But also in the Scriptures themselves: for example, think of the great presence in the commentaries of the Fathers on the Scriptures, of the parallel between Adam and Christ, that is, between the first Adam and the New Adam; a parallel that is already found in the letters of St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15, 21-22. 45-49). Therefore this approach to the Scriptures is authorised by the Scriptures themselves and finds wide resonance in the whole Tradition of the Church, especially in the patristic exegesis, but also throughout the

This approach, however, was put in discussion starting from the sixteenth century, with trends that placed the emphasis on the literal sense while gradually cutting away the spiritual meaning. The trend also spread to Catholic exegesis with Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), the father of the historical-critical method of approach to the Scriptures. Thus, a break was consummated between exegesis and theology: exegesis had to strip itself of every theological element and approach to treat the Sacred text only as a profane text, limiting its understanding of the text, while theology which, without a fundamental approach to support the sacred text, ended up becoming a system no longer rooted in the sacred text. Benedict XVI tried to mend this deleterious divorce in the exhortation *Verbum Domini* (see especially number 35).

In conclusion. The correct interpretation of the Scriptures cannot ignore the context of the Church, cannot ignore the hermeneutics of the faith, cannot ignore the Tradition of the Church. The same canon of the Scriptures is not given by the Scriptures, but it is given by the Tradition of the Church and therefore it makes no sense to think of an interpretation of the Scriptures that is independent of this Tradition.