

Faith and Fun in the Family

1. **Stick to the basics.** Never underestimate the power of repetition in forming faith. Pray the Prayer before Meals ("Bless us, O Lord . . .") before every meal, wherever you are (even in the car). And pray the Our Father and the Hail Mary as part of night prayers.
2. **Honor meals as family time.** Talk about things important to each family member. Share stories, memories, values, and upcoming plans or events. Make sure there are no electronics around that could cause distractions.
3. **Talk about Jesus.** Children should hear about Jesus at home as well as in church or during religious education sessions. Include conversations about what Jesus would do in different circumstances, ask Jesus to be with various people you encounter together, and remind one another how Jesus might feel when you do something good for others.
4. **Pray aloud.** Children should hear their parents praying. Share happenings of everyday life by requesting prayers from one another. For example, "Mom has a big presentation at work today. Let's pray now that the Holy Spirit will be with her." Or "Josh's spelling test is today. He really studied hard, so let's pray that he will remember what he knows." Also remember family members and others who are ill or in special need of prayer.
5. **Pray for safety and fair play in sports.** Emphasize that we pray for safety and fair play in our games, and that God does not favor one team over another. He loves the members of every team equally.
6. **Create a prayer space in your home.** A prayer space might be a small table placed in a corner of a room. Include a Bible, a candle (real or electric), a rosary, some favorite holy cards, and some Catholic children's books. Gather here at various times for family or individual prayer.
7. **Keep a rosary in the car.** Keep a rosary in the car, and pray it on short and long trips. Brush up on the list of the mysteries or keep a guide with you in the car, and announce one for each decade. When your child is ready, invite him or her to lead.



8. **Plan vacations with Mass in mind.** Each parish in the world is unique. Research nearby parish churches and plan to participate in the Eucharist on the Sundays you are vacationing. After Mass, introduce yourselves to the celebrating priest. Ask him for tips on local restaurants or other places to see in the area.
9. **Get out in the real world.** Enjoy God's gift of creation with your family. Visit a local park or nature preserve, and wonder aloud at the beauty of God's handiwork. At every site, pray a litany: "Thank you, God, for . . ." with each family member naming one thing she or he sees in nature. Go around as many times as you like!
10. **Bless your child.** A parent's blessing is a powerful sign of God's love. With your hand on your child's head, make the sign of the cross with your thumb on your child's forehead, while saying, "God bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Any other appropriate words can be added. Blessings can be done before any occasion, special or routine, such as leaving for school, preparing for a test or sports competition, or going to bed.
11. **Talk about your values.** Use TV, social media, video games, or other influences as "teachable moments" to express your Christian values. Be sure to accentuate the positive if you see it illustrated in a particular character or situation.
12. **Prepare for Mass together.** Mass should be anticipated with preparation. Saturday night might be a good time to read the Sunday Gospel at the evening meal. Discuss as a family what Jesus might be telling or showing your family in the Gospel. After Mass, incorporate the homily into your conversation on the way home.
13. **Celebrate feast days.** Keep track of annual feasts by using your parish calendar and bulletin reminders. Though the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter are key, various feasts during the year merit attention and offer an opportunity to celebrate faith and make the day special. You may want to add family name days to your feast-day calendar, as well as baptismal anniversaries. There are many sources, in books and online, for celebrating feast days on the Catholic calendar. Feast days give us a respite from everyday routine and root us more firmly in the life of Christ as mirrored in each individual feast or saint.



Biblical Literacy and the Teaching of Scripture

As a religious educator, you know the power that Scripture has to touch children's hearts and inspire their moral and spiritual lives. To remind us to draw on this power in catechesis, the Church's teaching documents always call us to make the Bible an integral part of our ministry:

Catechesis should take Sacred Scripture as its inspiration, its fundamental curriculum, and its end because it strengthens faith, nourishes the soul, and nurtures the spiritual life. (*National Directory for Catechesis*, p. 70)

Likewise, the holy synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful, especially those who live the religious life, to learn "the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine scriptures. (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum]*, 1965, 25)

Through catechetical ministry, catechists equip children with the essential knowledge and skills required for their lifelong journey of faith. When it comes to the Bible, those in ministry want to begin teaching the knowledge and skills that will help children to ultimately become biblically literate adults. So let's start by describing biblically literate adults.

Biblically literate adults are comfortable reading and using the Bible. They know how the books of the Bible are arranged and how to quickly and easily locate a specific book or passage. They have a solid understanding of the biblical story of salvation history, and they are familiar with key people and events and how God's saving power worked through those people and events. Biblically literate adults understand that any book or passage from Scripture must be understood in its proper context. When reading the Bible, they consider things like the literary genre, the culture of the time, the original author's intended message, how the message fits into the bigger picture of salvation history, and how the passage is understood in the Church's Tradition.

We can help children to become biblically literate adults by working on three specific goals:

- A. Help them to become knowledgeable and comfortable using the Bible.
- B. Help them to know and understand the biblical story of salvation history.
- C. Help them to understand how to interpret Bible books and passages in their proper contexts.

Goal A is the **Access** goal. Goal B is the **Big-Picture** goal. Goal C is the **Context** goal. Taken together, these can be called the ABCs of biblical literacy.

The three goals of biblical literacy follow a certain progression. The **Access** goal is the most basic; its competencies create a foundation for working on the **Big-Picture** and **Context** goals. The **Big-Picture** competencies build on the **Access** competencies and creates greater knowledge that the **Context** competencies can then build on. All three goals are closely related; working on any one goal usually reinforces the others.

As a general guideline, with elementary-age children, the primary focus should be developing the **Access** competencies and introducing some **Big-Picture** knowledge. The **Context** competencies will probably not be focused on, because they require more abstract reasoning than most young children are capable of. However, specific **Context** skills and knowledge competencies will be used as children learn about the meaning of specific Bible stories.

Let's take a closer look at these three goals and how catechists can help children to develop the competencies needed to become proficient in them. (For a more detailed look at these three goals, read *Biblical Literacy Made Easy: A Practical Guide for Catechists, Teachers, and Youth Ministers*, Saint Mary's Press, 2008.)

Access Goal: Helping Children Become Knowledgeable and Comfortable Using the Bible

Many children do not know how to use the Bible. They may have heard Bible stories, and maybe they were even given a Bible for their First Communion. But they do not know how the Bible is structured or how to find specific passages or stories within it. By focusing on the competencies of the **Access** goal, we can help the children we teach to become more familiar and comfortable with the Bible.

The most critical practice for achieving the **Access** goal—a practice so basic that many people overlook it—is simply having the children *use* the Bible. Too often children read Scripture passages as quotations in textbooks. There may be only one Bible in the classroom, so the catechist looks up the passage and then hands the opened Bible to a young person to read. These practices do not encourage children to learn basic biblical literacy skills. If young Catholics are to become comfortable in accessing the Bible, they must use it regularly. Every classroom or meeting space must have enough Bibles for each student to use. What we model as important has a much greater impact than what we say is important!

To help children become comfortable in using the Bible, we can teach them two important competencies: (1) knowing the Bible's structure and (2) locating a passage in the Bible.

Knowing the Bible's Structure

The Bible is not one book; rather, it is a collection, or even a small library, of books and letters. These books are organized in a specific and intentional structure, sort of like books might be grouped in sections on a bookshelf. At the beginning of *The Catholic Children's Bible*, these sections are briefly explained and visually presented in the section called "The Bible Is Like a Bookshelf." Here is a slightly more detailed explanation of those sections:

- **The Old Testament** is the first major section of the Bible. Its books are primarily about God's relationship with his Chosen People, the Israelites (or the Jews).
 - The first part of the Old Testament is called the **Pentateuch**. The stories in these books are the heart of the Old Testament.
 - The second part of the Old Testament is called the **Historical Books**. These books recount how the Chosen People settled in the Promised Land and how they eventually became a kingdom ruled by great and not-so-great kings.
 - The third part of the Old Testament is called the **Wisdom Books**. These books teach some of the collected wisdom of the Israelites.
 - The fourth part of the Old Testament is called the **Books of the Prophets**. These contain the warnings and consolations of some of Israel's prophets.
- **The New Testament** is the second major section of the Bible. Its books tell how God fulfilled the Old Testament promises by sending us the Savior, Jesus Christ.
 - The first part of the New Testament is the four **Gospels** and the **Acts of the Apostles**. The Gospels have the stories about Christ's life and teaching, and the Book of Acts tells us about how the Church spread after Christ's Ascension.
 - The second part of the New Testament is the **Letters**. Early Church leaders sent these letters, some to certain individuals and others to specific Christian communities.
 - The last book of the New Testament is the **Book of Revelation**. It is a unique collection of prophecies and symbolic visions.

These sections can be referred to when the children look up passages in the Bible with comment, such as, "This Bible story is from the Book of Exodus, which is in the Old Testament of the Bible," or "This Bible story is from the Gospel of Mark. The Gospels have stories about the life of Jesus and the things he taught."

Locating a Passage in the Bible

The system for finding a particular passage in the Bible is simple and explained in the beginning of *The Catholic Children's Bible* in the section called "How to Find a Bible Passage." After explaining this system to the children, catechists can assist them in developing the skill of locating Bible passages through practice, practice, practice! This skill will take time for children to master, but it is a crucial skill for lifelong Bible reading. Help in teaching navigation skills to children can be found in the article in each catechist guide—and this Online Director's Manual—titled "Helping Children Navigate *The Catholic Children's Bible*."

Big-Picture Goal: Helping Children Know and Understand the Biblical Story of Salvation History

Because of our Lectionary-based liturgies, Catholics are often familiar with most of the important people and stories of history. But if liturgies are a person's only contact with Scripture, she or he may not see how those individual stories fit into the overarching biblical story of God's covenant relationship with the human race, which we also call salvation history. Much of Catholic theology is based on the presumption that we know and understand the overarching story of salvation history.

Salvation history is often organized into different periods to help us understand God's saving work. In all relevant Saint Mary's Press® resources, eight historical periods are named to describe the arc of salvation history:

1. Primeval History (the figurative stories in the Book of Genesis)
2. The Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob)
3. Egypt and the Exodus (Moses and the desert experience of Israel)
4. Settling the Promised Land (Joshua and the Twelve Tribes of Israel)
5. The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel (the time of the Prophets)
6. The Exile and Return (the Babylonian captivity and restoration of the Temple)
7. The Life of Jesus Christ
8. The Early Christian Church

Understanding how each biblical book's story fits into this bigger history is the mark of a truly biblically literate person. This kind of knowledge grows with repetition and review. Catechists can best help children develop this knowledge by exposing them to key people and events in Scripture. *The Catholic Children's Bible* helps to do this by focusing on 125 key people and events in the Featured Stories on two-page spreads. Using these Featured Stories consistently with children will provide them an excellent foundation for knowing and understanding salvation history.

Context Goal: Helping Children Understand How to Interpret Bible Books and Passages in Their Proper Contexts

The **Context** goal is more subtle and complex than the **Access** and **Big-Picture** goals. Catechists typically do not work on the skills required to master this goal with young children. It requires a level of abstract thinking that this age-group is not yet capable of. However, catechists need to understand this goal in order to teach children the correct interpretation of the biblical stories they read.

This excerpt from the Second Vatican Council document *Divine Revelation* describes how to correctly interpret the Bible:

Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through human beings in human fashion, it follows that the interpreters of sacred scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, the meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words. (12)

This excerpt states that we must do two things when interpreting a Bible story or teaching. First, we must seek to understand what the original human author intended to communicate. The Church Fathers called this the “literal sense” of Scripture. Second, we must seek to understand what God is revealing through the story or passage. The Church Fathers called this the fuller sense or the “spiritual sense” of Scripture. Often the literal sense and the spiritual sense of a passage are closely related. But in some Scripture passages, God reveals, through the spiritual sense, a deeper and more universal truth than the human author originally understood or intended.

Paragraphs 109–119 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explain how to apply these principles. These paragraphs describe the contexts we must consider when interpreting any particular passage of the Bible, which is why we describe this as the **Context** goal.

- **Historical context** To understand the full importance or meaning of a certain event, we need to know the larger historical situation the event occurred within.
- **Cultural context** Sometimes the true meaning of certain actions or words makes sense only when we understand the cultural practices or beliefs of the time.
- **Literary genre** The Bible is composed of many different types of literature. We must know which type we are reading and realize that each genre has its own rules for interpretation.
- **Unity of the whole Bible** When taken as a whole, God’s revealed truth is presented in the Bible without error. This is the case in many Old Testament passages, whose Christian meaning can be completely and accurately understood only in light of the New Testament revelation.
- **Living Tradition of the Church** To fully understand some Bible passages, we must take into account how the Magisterium—the official teaching authority of the Church—has interpreted the meaning of those passages.
- **Coherence of the truths of faith** When it comes to religious or moral truth, the Bible cannot contradict itself or any other revealed truth of our Tradition.

If we do not interpret the Bible using these contexts, we could easily misinterpret God’s Revelation. This is the danger of biblical fundamentalism, an approach to biblical interpretation that Catholics are cautioned to avoid. In its extreme forms, biblical fundamentalism leads people to false beliefs, such as the belief that God created the universe in six twenty-four-hour days.

Even though catechists will not necessarily mention these different contexts when working with young children, the Featured Stories in *The Catholic Children's Bible* provide trustworthy tools to help children correctly understand the contexts of 125 Bible stories. The engaging art in *The Catholic Children's Bible* provides strong visual cues about the human author's intention. The Tell It! panels provide children the opportunity to retell the story using the visual prompts so that they begin to process its meaning. And the short Understand It! panels explain what God is revealing through the story, drawing upon the contexts of the unity of the Bible, Tradition, and the coherence of the truths of faith.

Helping Children Navigate *The Catholic Children's Bible*

Helping children become familiar with the structure of the Bible so that they can easily locate specific books and passages is a foundational part of building biblical literacy. *The Catholic Children's Bible* offers multiple tools to help children more readily navigate the Bible.

Color Coding

When you look at the bottom of *The Catholic Children's Bible* or open it to any page, you will notice bands of color along the bottoms of the pages. These colors delineate the major divisions of the Bible.

Bible Section	Bible Books	Band Color
The Pentateuch (or Torah)	Genesis through Deuteronomy	aqua
The Historical Books	Joshua through Second Maccabees	brown
The Wisdom Books	Job through Sirach	purple
The Books of the Prophets	Isaiah through Malachi	orange
The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles	Matthew through John and the Acts of the Apostles	blue
The Letters and Revelation	Romans through Revelation	green
Prayer and Bible Helps	back of the book	yellow

The same colors are shown in the table of contents (pages 3–6) as bands of color behind the name of each section of the Bible. They are also repeated in “The Bible Is Like a Bookshelf” image on page 15 of *The Catholic Children's Bible*. This image can be helpful in introducing children to the structure of the Bible and can be another resource to help them identify where a particular book of the Bible is located.

Page Tabs

You will also notice that the table of contents (pages 3–6) indicates a specific color for each book of the Bible. These colors are matched with tabs that are provided along the sides of each page within the Bible. A chapter number is also included in the tab to indicate the core chapter that is featured on each page.

Finding Specific Passages in the Bible

The article “How to Find a Bible Passage” on page 13 in *The Catholic Children's Bible* presents the traditional method of finding specific Bible passages by the name of the book, the chapter, and the verse. This is basic information for anyone who wishes to understand Scripture citations and use them to locate a particular Bible passage.

Navigating the Featured Stories

One of the most attractive elements of *The Catholic Children's Bible* is its Featured Stories. These stories encapsulate a Scripture story or passage, illustrate it, and surround it with the helpful Understand It!, Live It!, and Tell It! teaching aids. In addition, new or unfamiliar words are printed in bold type and presented with definitions. A full list of the 125 Featured Stories that are offered within the Bible is presented on pages 7–11 of *The Catholic Children's Bible*.

When the children encounter a Featured Story, such as the one presented on page 122, for example, they will see a green leaf at the beginning and end of the Scripture text. This indicates that this is a portion of text repeated from the main body of the Bible. To identify where this text comes from, the children can simply look at the Scripture citation or citations above the Scripture text. In many cases, this text shown for the Featured Story is a shortened version of a longer Scripture citation. The children can find the “full story” citation in their Bibles and will see two green leaves that indicate where the full story starts and stops (see pages 120–121).

The Dark Passages of Scripture

In helping children read and understand the Bible, catechists must be aware that some Bible stories are not child-friendly. The accounts of incest, rape, genocide, and holy war in the sacred pages of Scripture can come as a surprise for many beginning Bible readers. In his apostolic exhortation "The Word of the Lord" (*"Verbum Domini,"* November 2010), Pope Benedict XVI called these stories the "dark" passages of the Bible. Here is what the Holy Father said regarding these passages:

In discussing the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, the Synod also considered those passages in the Bible which, due to the violence and immorality they occasionally contain, prove obscure and difficult. Here it must be remembered first and foremost that *biblical revelation is deeply rooted in history*. God's plan is manifested progressively and it is accomplished slowly, in *successive stages* and despite human resistance. God chose a people and patiently worked to guide and educate them. Revelation is suited to the cultural and moral level of distant times and thus describes facts and customs, such as cheating and trickery, and acts of violence and massacre, without explicitly denouncing the immorality of such things. This can be explained by the historical context, yet it can cause the modern reader to be taken aback, especially if he or she fails to take account of the many "dark" deeds carried out down the centuries, and also in our own day. In the Old Testament, the preaching of the prophets vigorously challenged every kind of injustice and violence, whether collective or individual, and thus became God's way of training his people in preparation for the Gospel. So it would be a mistake to neglect those passages of Scripture that strike us as problematic. Rather, we should be aware that the correct interpretation of these passages requires a degree of expertise, acquired through a training that interprets the texts in their historical-literary context and within the Christian perspective which has as its ultimate hermeneutical key "the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ brought about in the paschal mystery."¹ I encourage scholars and pastors to help all the faithful to approach these passages through an interpretation which enables their meaning to emerge in the light of the mystery of Christ. (42)

In this teaching, Pope Benedict emphasized the following points:

- The Bible does not shy away from telling about the worst things that humans do to one another—these are the very things that Jesus Christ came to save us from. Unfortunately, these evil acts continue even into our time.
- The biblical author does not always explicitly say that a particular action is immoral; at the time he was writing, these actions might not have yet been seen as immoral (such as the killing of whole groups of people) or the biblical author may have presumed the reader knew that these were immoral actions (such as Lot's daughters having sexual relations with their drunken father). Because God's Revelation is "manifested progressively" and "is accomplished slowly, in successive stages," the preaching of the prophets and, ultimately, the teaching of Jesus Christ help us see the true moral meaning of these actions.
- Properly understanding these passages requires the help of people trained in biblical interpretation, such as pastors and biblical scholars.

So what does this mean for catechists when it comes to these dark passages of Scripture? The best advice is to avoid these passages completely, because these stories can be too disturbing and confusing for young and innocent minds. *The Catholic Children's Bible* does not use any of these stories as Featured Stories, so there is no need to worry about coming across any dark stories when the special two-page spreads are used.