

## **A challenge for Pope Benedict: Leading more people to read the Bible**

By John Thavis, [Catholic News Service](#)

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- When Pope Benedict XVI chose the Bible as the topic for this fall's Synod of Bishops, he turned the church's attention to an area he has long considered crucial and in need of revitalization.

The pope's concern touches several levels. For one thing, despite an upsurge in biblical interest after the Second Vatican Council, only a minority of Catholics read the Bible regularly. The pope views the lack of scriptural formation as part of a wider crisis of catechetics in the church.

At a more academic level, the pope sees a danger in modern biblical interpretation that he believes diminishes the meaning of Scripture and erodes the bond between Bible and church.

In particular, he has warned that various modern-day methods of interpreting the Bible are too limiting; for instance, some scholars read Scripture as if they are seeking to break a code and pluck out answers one by one.

Instead, Pope Benedict believes the Bible must be seen as a whole and as the word of God, in which everything relates to everything else and offers the possibility of a spiritual journey, rather than being seen as a textbook on divine matters.

So in convoking some 250 bishops for the Oct. 5-26 synod, the pope did not intend to host a forum for scriptural analysis. His primary interest is pastoral, and a main challenge is to lead more Catholics to the Bible.

As he told synod planners earlier this year, reading, interpreting and living the words of Scripture are fundamental to the faith life of Christians. Without that, the church's great works in the modern age -- including evangelization and ecumenism -- are bound to stall, he said.

Nor does the pope believe that scriptural expertise comes before the simple experience of reading the Bible. As a cardinal, he once said that he shares the view of liberation theology that the Bible belongs to the people, not the scholars.

And while specialists are needed, he said, "the real and essential meaning of the Bible is something the simple believer can grasp just as well."

That's something the pope has been promoting as universal pastor since his election in 2005. The very first words of his pontificate were a quote from Scripture -- a greeting from the First Letter of Peter -- and his talks and sermons over the last three and a half years have included some 3,000 references to scriptural passages.

The pope once said the Bible would be one of two books he would take with him if marooned on an island (the other was St. Augustine's "Confessions.") His own familiarity with Scripture is evident in the way he cites passages even in off-the-cuff remarks.

His written works seem to breathe Scripture. His first encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est" ("God Is Love"), was typical. It began with a citation from the First Letter of John and on practically every page drew from the Old and New Testaments, often making connections between the two. In his discussion of unjustified suffering, for example, he begins with a lesson from the Book of Job, then weaves in several Gospel passages.

One of Pope Benedict's primary convictions is that the New Testament offers the key to understanding the Old Testament and that, as a whole, the Bible necessarily leads to Christ.

But he believes this traditional Christological approach has been threatened by some modern schools of interpretation that would limit the meaning of any biblical book to the author's historical context.

In a 2001 essay, he described in dramatic terms how such interpretation jeopardized the "internal harmony" of the Bible as understood by Christians through the centuries.

By presuming that Old Testament writers could not have intended to refer in advance to Christ and the New Testament faith, he warned, this new line of biblical study would "sound the death knell" for the Christian understanding of Old Testament-New Testament unity.

As early as the Second Vatican Council, the pope -- then Father Joseph Ratzinger -- was involved deeply in a debate over the relationship among Scripture, tradition and the church's magisterium, or teaching authority. Here, too, the future pope identified a dangerous trend in biblical interpretation that saw Scripture as the entire deposit of the faith.

As a council expert, Father Ratzinger wrote that this approach was not balanced and that "revelation ... is greater even than the words of Scripture."

Much later, he expanded on this point in the book, "God and the World," saying that when it came to the authorship of the Bible it was clear that "God did not just dictate these words." Instead, the words of Scripture bear the impression of a history guided by God, a history that directly involves the church, he said.

Pope Benedict always has emphasized that this history continues, and that the Bible, far from a piece of literature or a historical record, is a living book that touches the present.

In a foreword to his 2007 book, "Jesus of Nazareth," the pope said the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects: the individual author, the church and God.

"The people of God -- the church -- is the living subject of Scripture; it is in the church that the words of the Bible are always in the present," he wrote.

What he attempted to do in his book on Jesus, he explained, was to use historical insights to help reveal the figure of Jesus, but to go beyond purely historical interpretation.

Instead, he said, his method takes the conviction of faith -- faith that Jesus truly was God -- as a starting point for reading Scripture. This approach allows for a proper theological interpretation of the Bible, yet does not sacrifice the church's "serious engagement with history," he said.

The pope has noted the Bible's ability to inspire individuals and impact their day-to-day decisions. But he has also cautioned against reading the Bible for easy answers, which would "turn Scripture into an oracle."

What's important, he once said, is to "read the Bible regularly, to let it keep us company and guide us."