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In the beginning ...

Lay Catholics, traditionally, have been less familiar with the Scriptures than some other Christian denominations. A new resource, 'Take and Read', offers invaluable help

When I went to a Bible study group for the first time, I was a grown woman with pre-school children. The group was held at a (non-Catholic) church during the day, for women. I was in unfamiliar territory, but had come along as a result of a persistent invitation from a new friend. We were asked to turn to Titus in our Bibles; and I remember thinking that I would not be more at a loss if I were being asked to turn a somersault. My neighbours on either side of me turned to the letters section in the New Testament. As one of them reached over and helped me to find my place, I began to realise that other Christians were far more familiar with Scripture texts than many Catholics are.

When I was growing up, the Scriptures were seen as too holy and scholarly for study by an "uninformed laity". Theological formation was available only to the clergy and some Religious and access to the Scriptures was mediated to the lay Catholics through instruction and the homily at Sunday Mass.

Following *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation issued by Pope Paul VI, a variety of resources and initiatives were produced to encourage access to scriptural texts and, while lay biblical scholarship has flourished in some ways, there is still a lack of confidence at parish level – particularly where leadership of a Bible study group is concerned.

In recognition of this lack of confidence, the bishops of England and Wales have published the teaching document "The Gift of Scripture". Its aim was to re-present the message of and reignite the flames of enthusiasm for Divine Revelation through knowledge of the Scriptures. Centuries after St Augustine, the bishops might have echoed his words: "and behold I heard a voice from a nearby house singing and frequently repeating, like a boy or a girl, I do not know which: Take and read; take and read" (*Augustine's Confessions* VIII, 29).

This expression "take and read" describes the moment in which the reading of a text of Scripture transformed Augustine's life. The Second Vatican Council Fathers yearned to offer a similar experience to all faithful Christians when *Dei Verbum* was promulgated in 1965. In a dramatic shift of emphasis, all the faithful were encouraged to seek a more in-

formed understanding of the richness of the Word of God, as it was through Scripture and through the Church's tradition that God was made known to humanity.

Theologians at the time were moving away from a propositional view of revelation to develop the model of revelation as interpersonal encounter or – in a word – dialogue. Instead of being interpreted primarily as God revealing truths, revelation is now understood to be God's self-revelation. Revelation is seen as a person-to-person encounter – a question of who is revealed rather than what is revealed.

The National Project for Catechesis and Religious Education has responded to the bishops' teaching document by producing a new Scripture resource called "Take and Read". The first volume published is on the gospel of Mark. There are 12 passages – each part builds on the one before and aims to raise the awareness of the participants to the relevance and challenge of Scripture to life today.

In order to build the confidence needed in local parishes to use this new resource, we offered Bible study group leaders, parish catechists and others a weekend at Abbotswick House of Prayer a few months ago. The aim of the weekend was to offer the participants informed scripture study within the context of a community of faith – one that we hoped would inspire and enable parish leaders to create a similar experience in their own parishes.

The first challenge on the weekend was to create a community from a group of strangers. Clearly there is no formula that guarantees authenticity in this respect but the warmth of the welcome at Abbotswick, the shared food and the opportunities to pray together all helped to dispose participants towards a community orientation. Add a little competitive fun in the shape of a Bible quiz on the first evening and the scene was set for a real encounter with Scripture and with each other.

The weekend was proposed by Fr Adrian Graffy, scripture scholar and currently director of the Brentwood Diocesan Commission for Evangelisation and Formation. He was with

us for the weekend. The "Take and Read" resource provides carefully chosen background reading – such as short excerpts from the Church Fathers and church documents – as well as beautifully presented examples of Christian art and practice. This material informs, stimulates and challenges not only the individual reader but also any group that engages with it. It presents Jesus to us in a fresh and exciting way. Jesus throws down the challenge of discipleship – and each session invites people to renew and deepen their commitment to living the Word.

Critics sometimes say that small-group sharing sessions are akin to sharing ignorance. "Take and Read" ensures that this is not the case; the depth of discussion that arises from the richly resourced group is evidence of this. In addition, people are encouraged to bring their own copy of the Bible; and the diversity in translations adds to the depth of the discussion. Several of the participants expressed an interest in developing a Bible study group in their home parishes as a result of the weekend; more important was the personal benefit felt by several.

There will be a Worldwide Bishops' Synod on the Word of God in Rome in October 2008. The preparatory material for the synod suggests that programmes at national and diocesan level should foster a biblical movement among the laity and attend to the formation of listening groups or Bible groups. I'd like to think that the participants of our "Take and Read" weekend are already beginning to fulfil one of the aspirations of the forthcoming synod.

TO DO

Ask yourself what opportunities there are in your parish for scripture study

Consider using "Take and Read" in your parish

Identify small group leaders and invite them to a "Take and Read" weekend

■ Anne Dixon was Adult Formation Adviser to the Diocese of Southwark and Coordinator of the National Project for Religious Education and Catechesis. For information about "Take and Read" weekends, email clive@dioceseofbrentwood.org. *Take and Read: the Gospel of Mark* is available at £8.95 from Matthew James Publishing (<http://www.matthew-james.co.uk>).