

PART THREE: UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 1 THE TWO SENSES OF THE BIBLE

The Church teaches:

“According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual”
(CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH 115)

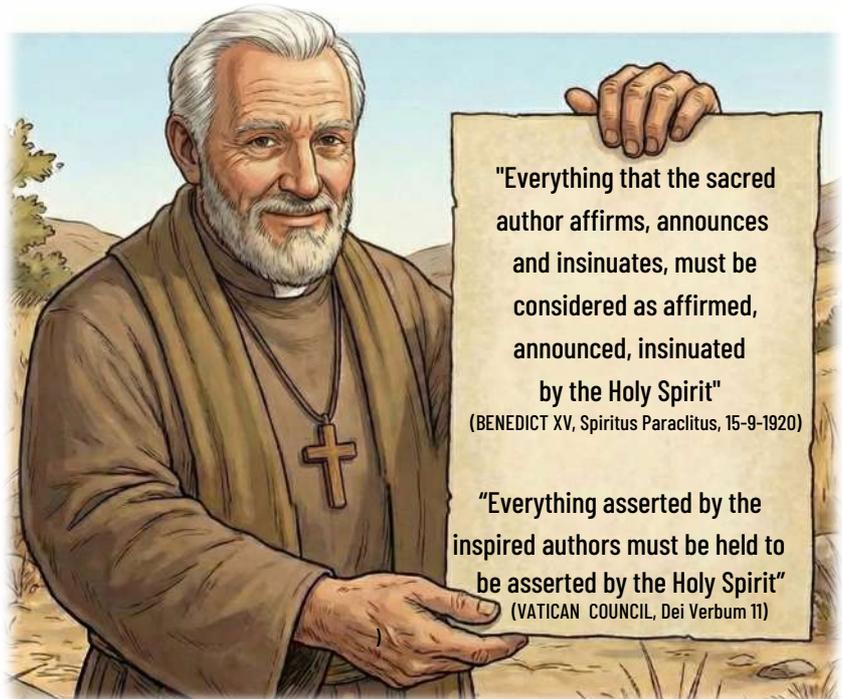
1.-LITERAL SENSE

“Is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture....
All other senses of Sacred Scripture
are base don the literal”
(CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH 116)

The literal sense is, therefore, what the expression used means. For example, if Scripture says, "God loves us," the literal sense is what that expression literally means: "God looks upon us with pleasure, loves us, is considerate of us, desires our good." For all of that is included in the literal meaning of the expression "God loves us."

The literal sense is the main meaning of the Bible: if we want to know what Sacred Scripture is saying we must, first of all, simply pay attention to what the expresión used in the text is saying, affirming, denying, suggesting...

God speaks to us through this literal sense.



"Everything that the sacred author affirms, announces and insinuates, must be considered as affirmed, announced, insinuated by the Holy Spirit"

(BENEDICT XV, Spiritus Paraclitus, 15-9-1920)

"Everything asserted by the inspired authors must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit"

(VATICAN COUNCIL, Dei Verbum 11)

And so, when a biblical author affirms, denies, or suggests something related to the truths necessary for our salvation, **we are certain** that it is God who is affirming, denying, or suggesting such things. For example: St. Paul expressly says that adulterers will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven (*1 Corinthians 6:9-10*). An adulterer means a person who, while married, has sexual relations with someone other than his husband or wife. St. Paul affirms without hesitation that such an action prevents us from going to Heaven. Therefore such an action is a grave sin. We are facing a subject that touches on truths necessary for our salvation, since we are told about moral behaviors that prevent salvation. Therefore the wickedness of adultery is something revealed by God. It is the Word of God. It is an absolute truth and will always be true, in all human ages and cultures. It is not an idea of St. Paul, nor a simple cultural custom, but a teaching of God for all human beings of all times.



St. Paul affirms that adultery leads to condemnation. It is God, therefore, who teaches us this through St. Paul

2.-SPIRITUAL SENSE

Since the Bible is inspired by God, the Lord has placed deep meanings in some texts of Scripture that are not grasped at first glance. Apart from the obvious material sense, there may be a more hidden meaning, a meaning that transcends the mere materiality of the words or facts narrated. It is the spiritual sense.

That there is such a sense is something that the Bible itself teaches. Saint Paul, speaking of the historical moment in which God made water spring up from a stone so that the people of Israel could survive while walking through the desert towards the promised land (*Ex 17:6*), affirms that this happened as a symbol of Christ, the true Rock from which comes the water that gives authentic life (*1 Cor 10:10, 4*). Then God, in inspiring the author of the book of Exodus to narrate that event, not only taught that we must trust in God, because He will perform miracles if necessary to free those who have placed all their hope in Him (literal sense of the scene of the rock that gives water in the desert), but also, secretly, he was announcing Jesus, from whom we obtain spiritual water: the communion of love with God.

How can we find out the spiritual sense? Some of these **meanings are revealed to us by Scripture itself** (as in the example cited above). Others are revealed to us by **the Magisterium of the Church** through its official teachings (such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church). The vast majority of the time we find out thanks to the **writings of the Holy Fathers** (authors of the first centuries of Christianity such as St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Irenaeus of Lyon, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, Origen... who received much light from God to understand the spiritual meaning of the Bible) and **also the writings of the various saints** in the history of the Church (since God enlightened them in a special way to understand Sacred Scripture).

Discovering the spiritual meaning of a biblical passage is a great help to understand it better because through that literal sense God is transmitting a message to us. Let's take two examples:

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, SON OF ABRAHAM (GENESIS 22)

To test Abraham's faith, God asked him to sacrifice his only son, an innocent young man. Abraham He accepted what God told him to do and took his son to the top of a mountain where he planned to sacrifice him. The child was going to carrying a bundle of wood for the sacrifice. God did not want the boy's death: it was a test of faith for Abraham. The literal meaning of the text teaches us that we must trust God completely, love Him above all else, and be prepared because our faith can be tested. But there is a spiritual sense in this passage: Isaac was a symbol of Jesus, the only Son of God, who carrying the cross (just as Isaac carried the wood), and being totally innocent, was sacrificed for the forgiveness of our sins. And so God showed us the immense and infinite love He has for us, sacrificing Himself for our salvation.



DAVID VS. GOLIATH (1 SAMUEL 17)

David was neither a soldier nor an expert in battles. And yet he was able to defeat the giant Goliath with a simple stone because he put his trust in God (even though Goliath was well armed and a formidable soldier). David did not want to use the human weapons offered to him (swords, armor) but only his trust in God.

The literal sense of this story teaches us to trust God even in desperate situations where everything seems to be against us. But there is a deep spiritual meaning: in our struggle against the enemies of salvation (the spiritual enemies: the demons) we must use the supernatural means (prayer, sacraments, penances) expressed in stone, because God will act with his strength through these means, apparently useless in the human, and will give us victory against evil.

