

## Health food for the soul

By Patricia Davis  
NC News Service

Once, in a class of adults, the teacher asked, "If you were imprisoned without any books or other possessions, what biblical passages would you rely on? What could you call up from memory?"

Not much, I was chagrined to find. Only a few verses came immediately to mind.

—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

—"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."

—"In the beginning was the word."

Most of what came to mind were words in hymns I knew. Often these were drawn from Scripture, so I was not as poor as I feared.

But that wise teacher's question stayed with me. I began to study Scripture, formally and informally.

What I found is that the Bible is a virtual library of books and contains many literary forms: songs and stories, history and biography, law and letters. I studied its authors — some known, some obscure — and the societies in which they wrote.

As a parent, I want my children to become educated in a variety of ways. I want them to be familiar with the great language and thoughts of our English-speaking tradition. They need technical training and skills.

They need to read newspapers, visit museums, listen to good music, see serious films. Without exposure to these areas they will enter adulthood handicapped.

The same is true of religion. I encourage my children to study Catholicism. I introduce them to the Bible, including differing translations and commentaries.

But study, while important, is not enough. Scripture nourishes both intellect and spirit; it is a primary source for prayer.

Think of the book of Psalms. It has inspired women and men of faith for many centuries.

Psalms are hymns which express every human emotion imaginable: joy, fear, grief, hope, rage, despair, trust, repentance, praise. No wonder the gospel writers record Jesus voicing these very prayers.

When I am too tired or distracted to pray, when my spirit feels shriveled and dry, or when God seems far away, I pray the Psalms.

Another way to pray is to reflect, over a period of time, on a brief passage from the Bible. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and martyr who directed an underground seminary in Germany in the 1930s, asked his students to do this one hour each day. They were to spend a week on a single verse of Scripture. At first they protested, but Bonhoeffer insisted. Soon the seminarians came to value his advice.

Actually, it works — and more and more people are trying it. I recall praying for a week with part of the seventh verse of Psalm 95: "You shall know this power today if you will listen to his voice." How packed with meaning those words are!

The first word, "you," suggests God's personal, parental love for each individual. The psalmist is addressing me, not "people" or "everyone." I reflected on what it means to be in a relationship with another and recalled God's presence in my life.

Each succeeding word — know, power, listen, voice — is filled with meaning.

Yes, I would say that library of books known as Scripture is worth knowing "about." But there is more to it than that. There are ways of knowing Scripture by which it becomes part of you — not just part of your intellect, but part of your spirit.

(Ms. Davis is on the staff of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity.)

or the result of prayerful reflection. These are not mere eyewitness accounts of what Jesus said and did. They are the results of devout contemplation on Christ. In the Gospels we discover what Jesus meant to the very early Christians. This is how they saw him as an answer to their questions, their problems, their aspirations. So in reading the Gospels we enter into the life of Jesus — and into the lives of all those people who believed that in encountering him they encountered God. Their contemplation becomes ours. Their reflections spark further reflections on our part.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

# FOOD...

## ...for thought

How does the Bible connect with life as people live it today?

A woman who is a pastoral minister at one of Washington, D.C.'s homes for the elderly and the chronically ill has some insights about this. Her work is physically demanding, sometimes emotionally draining.

Each morning her pattern is the same. She rises early. She opens her Bible and reads scripture passages for the day slowly, thoughtfully. Then she tries to envision her day ahead.

"Where will I encounter situations like those I have just read about? How will I respond in those situations?" she asks herself.

For this woman, Scripture provides challenge and comfort. She needs both for her work with people who often have lost almost everything — health, independence, family, friends.

One morning she came to the gospel story in which Jesus feeds so many people with just five loaves and two fish. On one level the story spoke eloquently of Jesus' compassion for hungry people. But it also made her think about other hungers she encounters: loneliness, anxiety and fear among residents of the home where she works.

The "food" she provides them takes many forms: talking with an elderly man who never has

visitors; helping a blind woman buy clothing; bringing the Eucharist to the bedridden; acting as an advocate for a person treated unjustly.

Her thoughts about the Bible's purposes echo some of those by Bishop Roger Mahony of Stockton, Calif. Just about a year ago he wrote a pastoral letter on the Bible.

The bishop cautioned that the Bible was not intended to be an encyclopedia with answers to every question. But, he said, it offers a way of coming "to see ourselves and our world through God's own eyes."

Many people read the Bible, asking themselves "what God is saying to them," Bishop Mahony wrote. And they "let the Bible speak to the different emotions they feel — joy, discouragement, peace, anger, surprise." This, they find, may calm them, reassure them. God's word, the bishop said, can actually create "a new future for us."

The bishop offered practical suggestions on how to "dig down deep" into a story or passage from the Bible. Some of them: imagine the feelings of all those present in the story; think why the early church might have preserved this story; and imagine what human needs today can be met by what it says.

## ...for discussion

1. David Gibson says the pope has some very definite ideas about mercy. What is the pope's concept of mercy?

2. The pope's visit to the man convicted of trying to kill him attracted the attention of many people. In your opinion, why did this event capture such attention? What role do you think Scripture played in the pope's action?

3. Why does Anthony Tambasco, in Katharine Bird's article, say the Bible might be confusing to people?

4. Father John Castelot says that the Bible is our story. How can biblical stories, written so long ago, relate to the lives of Christians in the 20th century?

5. In her article, Patricia Davis says that Scripture should be seen as a way to nourish the soul. What ways does she suggest for a person to "know Scripture?"

### SECOND HELPINGS

"The Old Testament: God's Word to His People," by Father James Black. This book provides some clues on reading the Bible intelligently. The author, an educator, points out that the Bible comes from a culture different from our own. Though "we can't go back physically in time to those days," he writes, it is helpful if we "can imagine doing so." The more people immerse themselves in the time and culture of the biblical world, the more they will understand the biblical writers and their concerns. Father Black comments. Discussion questions and chapter summaries are included. (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556. 1982. \$3.95. Teacher's manual, \$2.95.)