

Catholics returning to Scripture study for divine guidance

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

About five years ago, Marie French decided that she had had enough of sitting silently when her Protestant acquaintances talked about the Bible.

"You hear non-Catholics quoting from the Bible, and I thought it would be nice to be doing that," French said. "I think a lot of (Catholics) feel like I do. You feel ignorant when you hear these other people quoting the verse and the chapter."

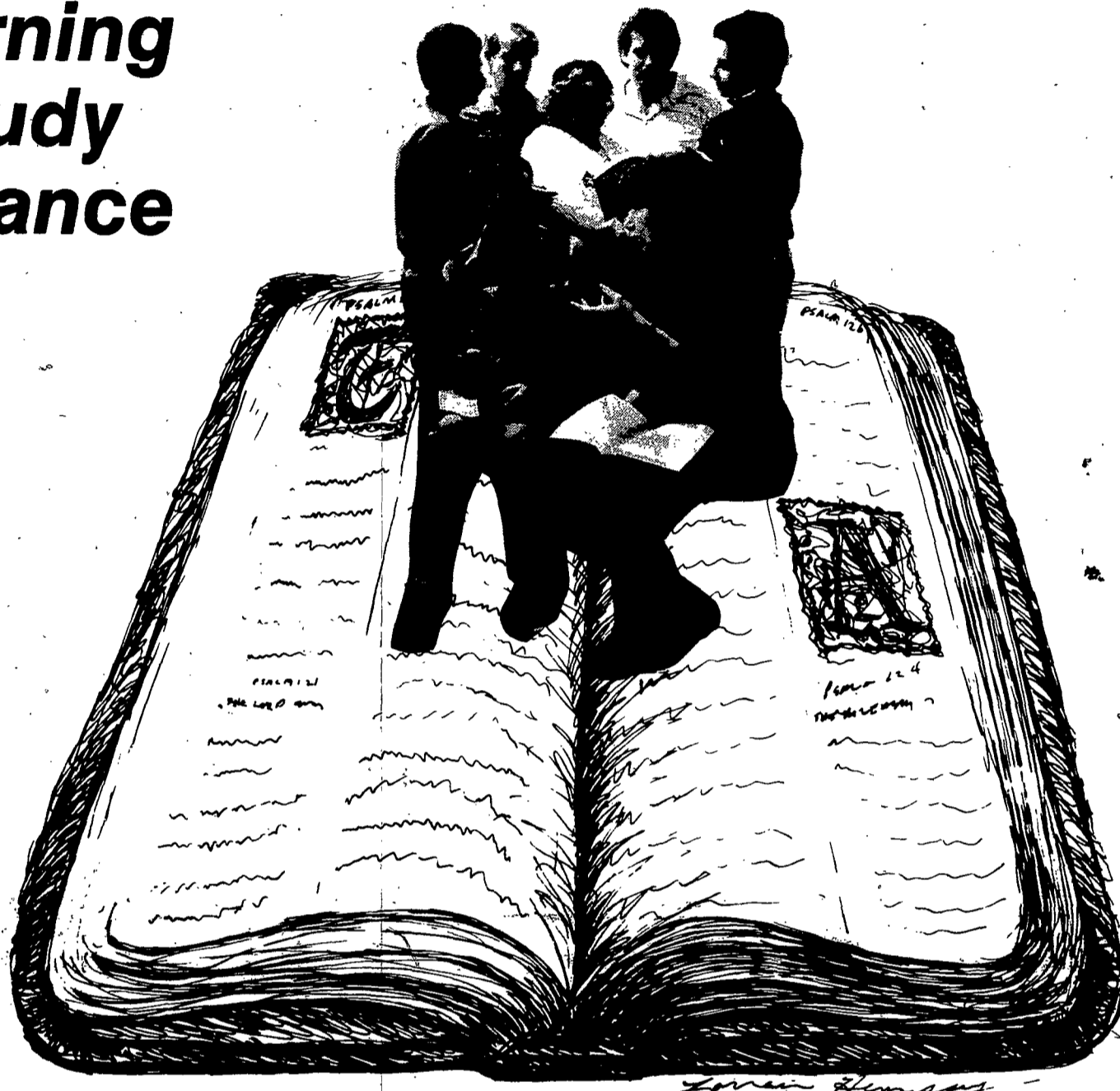
Along with nine other parishioners at St. Mary of the Hills in Honeoye, French has been studying the Scriptures on a weekly basis for the last few years. Members of the Bible-study group meet Mondays from 9:30-11 a.m., and use various workbooks to guide them as they explore the Old and New Testaments.

The weekly sessions have changed French's view of God, she said.

"Well, I always trusted Him," she said, "but at a different level — like (God was) a grandmother or an aunt. Now, I know Him better. I'm closer to Him. I feel more like He's with me all the time."

French's words express the motivations underlying many Catholics' desire to learn about the Bible. Long a major concern of Protestant Christians, Scripture study has become more popular among Catholics ever since Pope Pius XII issued his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which encouraged Catholic Bible scholars to examine the Scriptures in the languages in which they were originally written.

The wave of Catholic biblical scholarship that ensued from the encyclical flowed into the Second Vatican Council, which issued the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Rev-



'If you're going to be a Christian, you want to be like Christ. To find out what Christ is like, (look) in the Bible.'

Father David Mura

elation, (*Dei Verbum*.) Chapter five of this document emphasized that biblical faith includes a loyal adherence to a personal God revealed through Scripture.

Vatican II also expanded the role of Scripture in liturgical celebrations. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, issued in late 1963, called for "a more ample, varied, and more suitable reading from Sacred Scriptures" to be restored in order "that the intimate connection between rite and words may be apparent in the liturgy."

In practical terms, *Dei Verbum* led to the restructuring of Sunday Masses to include three readings from Scripture rather than two, and encouraged priests to give homilies explaining and elaborating on scriptural readings.

Such changes in the church signaled a new era of Catholic interest in the Bible, said Sister Campion Bush, SSJ, pastoral assistant at St. Augustine's in Rochester.

Before Vatican II, Sister Bush recalled, sermons focused on various topics or themes that rarely related to the readings. "Maybe for four weeks, it would be 'Understanding the Holy Eucharist,' or 'Penance,'" she said. But "when they started preaching on the Gospel during Mass, people became more interested in where (the Gospel stories) came from."

Shifting homily topics away from sacramental or moral issues and toward scriptural themes gave new weight to the importance for Catholics to know the Bible, noted Sister Edna Slyck, RSM, pastoral assistant at St. Patrick's in Corning.

"(Scripture) is becoming more real to us in the way that

the homilies are being presented," Sister Slyck said, adding that many Catholics in the pews ask about the weekly readings at Mass: "What is it really saying to me at this point in my life?"

To help answer that question, several parishes, such as St. Augustine's and St. Patrick's, have established Bible-study groups. Some meet weekly, some monthly, some over breakfast and some for the span of a liturgical season such as Lent.

St. Augustine's is home to three Bible-oriented groups, and Sister Slyck said St. Patrick's parish has sponsored one group for the last seven years. The St. Patrick's group disbanded when the diocese chose to offer Academy of Scripture courses through the parish this year, she said.

While no one knows just how many such groups exist at the parish level, the evidence points to the existence of a large number of Bible-study groups in the diocese, according to Maribeth Mancini, diocesan director of the Department of Religious Education.

"I was in adult education for seven years, and we got requests for Bible-study group leadership training all the time," said Mancini, who served as diocesan consultant for adult education prior to taking on her current position last summer.

Since 1985, the Rochester diocese has offered training for the leaders of Bible-study groups in the form of one-day seminars, but with the establishment of the Academy of Scripture this fall, scriptural scholarship has become even more visible around the diocese.

The academy offers courses at both basic and advanced levels. Adult Catholics may attend classes at any one of nine parishes throughout the diocese where academy courses are being offered during the fall. Each course consists of five weekly sessions that focus on either the New or Old Testaments.

So far, 80 adults have signed up for academy classes, according to Sister Mary Lynch, who works with the Sisters of St. Joseph's Spirituality Institute. Sister Lynch, who helped design the academy's curriculum, said the diocese established the program in order to avail Catholics of sound information on the Bible.

"I've worked in religious education in the parishes for 10 years," Sister Lynch said. "In that experience, I found that people have a great hunger for the Scripture, and that very often solid Catholic scholarship has not been available for

our people."

The academy "is an attempt to bring to a parish setting the Scripture scholarship of our time and to present Scripture scholarship in a way that — without knowing all the jargon — people can get insight into what Scripture scholars are saying," she added.

Insight is what Gertrude Scheer sought in 1965 when she was drawn to St. Patrick's Bible-study group through the inspiration of Vatican II's scriptural emphasis. She noted that her life has changed dramatically since she first opened the Bible in the company of other Catholics.

Prior to joining Bible study, Scheer didn't think much about the actions of the Holy Spirit in her life. "I never thought about Him at all," she said. "To me, mostly Jesus and His mother (were important)."

Reading the New Testament, however — particularly the Acts of the Apostles — has enlivened Scheer's faith in the Third Person of the Trinity. "The Holy Spirit is just beaming through me," she said.

Norm Hogue also experienced a similar enlightenment since he first began going to a Bible-study group at St. Michael's in Penn Yan eight years ago.

"Some people think the Mass is strictly the Eucharist, but the readings are the Word of God," said Hogue, who noted that he has come to realize that Scripture is the foundation of his faith as a Catholic.

"I wanted to understand (the Bible) more," he said. "I wanted to read more up on it."

Bible study has quickened Hogue's sense of God, he said, adding, "I don't think I was ever without religion," but studying the Gospels "is realizing what (Jesus) did for us."

Father David Mura, assistant pastor at St. Michael's Church, echoed Hogue's sentiments. Catholics need to become "Bible-literate," Father Mura asserted, so they can realize that their church has been biblically based for the last 2,000 years.

Recently, the priest began encouraging his parishioners to bring Bibles to Mass so they could locate the Sunday readings in Scripture.

Although Catholics traditionally have refrained from reading the Bible, becoming well-versed in the Scriptures is perfectly logical for Catholics, Father Mura noted.

"If you're going to be a Christian, you want to be like Christ. To find out what Christ is like, (look) in the Bible," he concluded.