Sharing Personal Faith
The Practice of Bible-Sharing

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The author relates his experience working with others in developing a method not only for instructing people in reading the Bible but for creating groups which engage in Bible-sharing. The approach, building upon the traditional method of lectio divina, has been used with success in a variety of cultures and locales.

Introduction

On July 3, 1991 in Xian, the ancient capital of China, I met the local bishop. After I had introduced myself as the General Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Federation, he showed me the Chinese translation of the Basic Bible Seminar (BBS) with the so-called “Vigan Method” of Bible Sharing, a course and a method that had been worked out at John Paul I Biblical Center in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, Philippines—the Center which I had helped establish in 1979. In the evening of that day in 1991, I rushed a postcard to Filipina Sr. Henrietta Sebastian, O.S.B., in Vigan. She had the original inspiration for both the Biblical Center and the Basic Bible Seminar. “Imagine,” I wrote, “our BBS with its Bible sharing method in the heart of China!”

I found out later that, precisely on that day, “Mother Hen”—as we called her fondly—went home to the Lord after a long struggle with cancer. Sister Henrietta was not able read that postcard, but I trust she rejoiced in heaven about the success of the seminar she had inspired some twenty years before.

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When the Basic Bible Seminar was conceived, it was intended for the simple people in the barrios (villages) of the Philippines and geared towards introducing people to the method of Bible-sharing. The project of the BBS was the fruit of Sister Henrietta’s insight, determination, and pastoral zeal. After she had directed the Catechetical Formation Center run by her community in Vigan for several years, she had returned to working at the “grass roots level.” “We need a very simple introduction to the Bible for the simple people in the Basic Christian Communities in our barrios who are hungry for the Word of God,” she said. “It should be an introduction not just to the Bible itself, but to the proper, the responsible and fruitful use of the Bible.” Sister Henrietta spent her summer in our newly set-up John Paul I Biblical Center located at the Immaculate Conception School of Theology in Vigan, where I was teaching New Testament.

That summer we worked together on the project. We reflected and shared together, drawing on our own experiences, as well as on whatever we had learned from contacts with the Lumko Institute of South Africa and the methods and insights of Carlos Mesters in Brazil. After finishing the first draft we did some trial runs in two different language areas—on the Tagalog-speaking island of Mindoro where Sister Henrietta was working and in the Ilokos region where the seminary and the Center were located. We met again, shared our experiences, and re-did the first draft. As a final step we submitted it for reactions to several resource persons experienced in the field of pastoral theology, catechetics, and the biblical apostolate.

The final product, available first in English, Tagalog, and Ilokano, has been gradually translated into other languages and dialects in the Philippines. Soon, however, even though it had been devised for the local church in the Philippines, it gradually spread to other countries, mainly through Filipino Divine Word Missionaries: to Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Africa, especially the Congo, and to several countries in Latin America. Almost twenty years after launching the project, a sister in Papua New Guinea wrote in a letter of May 3, 2001: “With only a little adaptation I have used it with university students, seminarians, all levels of school teachers, pastoral workers and our good grass root people.”

The Basic Bible Seminar and the “Vigan Method”

The Basic Bible Seminar is simply an introductory course to the proper use of the Bible. The “Vigan Method,” on the other hand, is a Bible-sharing method for small groups, following basically the ancient method of lectio divina. Its main ingredients are: community, life, and prayer, i.e., it is done in small groups, in a prayerful way, and is related to ordinary life.

As I realized only later, in order to fruitfully collaborate with Sister Henrietta on this project, I had to undergo a second phase of training in the Bible. I had
been trained in scientific biblical exegesis at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Now I needed to be taught by the so-called simple people—in a way applying to myself Jesus’ word about the wise and the learned versus the simple (Luke 10:21). I had been trained to teach Scripture; hence, for me historical-critical exegesis was the approach to Scripture. Then, from the people of the mountainous Province of Abra in the Philippines I learned to ask different questions about the Bible. In one way or another they always wanted to know: “What does it mean for our life?” These simple, but eminently wise women and men helped me to discover, or rather realize, what I certainly had heard many times before: the Bible is the Book of Life. The confirmation that these were the right questions came from Cardinal König of Vienna, the first president of the Catholic Biblical Federation, during its Second Plenary on the island of Malta in 1978. Addressing biblical scholars and people involved in the biblical apostolate he said: “Our task is not in the first place to interpret a book, but to interpret life. This we do in the light of the word which is accessible for us in a special way in Sacred Scripture” (König, 1979).

While doing further studies in Rome in the 1970s, I came across the booklet Pregare la Parola (Praying the Word), by Enzo Bianchi (Bianchi), the founder and prior of the ecumenical and monastic community of Bose in Northern Italy. Pregare la Parola is but one of the many books that have appeared since the Second Vatican II on lectio divina, and it was a book that helped in rediscovering this ancient method of reading and praying the Scriptures. It helped me and many others to realize that the Bible, the Book of Life, is also our Basic Prayer Book. Our faith tells us of the inspired character of Sacred Scripture. Whatever this means, and however theologians explain it, for the simple people this means: We read this special book not only as an act of communication like when reading any other piece of writing. We rather hold it in faith that God wants to speak to us, has a message for us here and now in this writing even though it is of a different time and different culture. If God indeed is speaking to us, we cannot but listen to him attentively and respectfully with all our readiness to respond in prayer and in action. This openness and responsiveness—what else is it other than prayer?

When I started teaching Scripture to ordinary people in the Philippines, or leading people in Bible study, I tried to do it in a way people could follow. I tried to convince the people that the Bible was their book, the Book of the Community. I did not succeed at first. For them it was still the book of the priest or of the scholar. As time went on I noticed that the initial enthusiasm with which people

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came to the Bible Seminar gradually dwindled away. Then, in my own learning process, I came across a booklet by Dutch-born Brazilian Carmelite Carlos Mesters, *Il Popolo Interpreta La Bibbia* (The People Interpret the Bible) (Mesters), and, later, *Joy of Discovery in Bible Study* by Oletta Wald (Wald).

Reading these books I came to realize that Bible study is not a “higher” method of dealing with the Bible and Bible-sharing an “inferior” one, accessible to those who could not scale the heights of exegesis. Each is complementary to the other. In fact, I found out that the first step had to be to introduce people to Bible sharing—letting the Word speak to them—rather than feeding them with all kinds of (often irrelevant) information about the Bible. This latter practice more often than not turned them away from the Sacred Book. I found out that Bible sharing, if done regularly and attentively, would produce questions like: “Who are these Sadducees?” When such questions came up the time was then ripe for some input or Bible study. In addition to leading to the joy of discovery, I tried to steer people away from an over-estimation of scholars and scholarship.

This meant, in a practical way, that I would not myself participate in the Bible sharing sessions during our Basic Bible Seminars. My presence, I found out, did not encourage them to open their mouths and share their own insights. In addition to giving them a method, I tried to encourage them and assure them that they could do it and that they would complement each other with their insights. In short, I tried to convince them that they would experience themselves that the Bible is truly *their* book, the book of the community.

The theoretical part of the Basic Bible Seminar course tries to inculcate the right understanding of what kind of book the Bible is; we start with the familiar—terms like “Bible,” “Scripture,” “Testament.” This led to an appreciation of the Bible as the Book of the Community, the Basic Prayer Book and the Book of Life. After this, as the logical climax, we introduced them to the method of Bible-sharing.

**The Method of Bible Sharing**

The practical method itself follows three major steps:

- Reading the TEXT with great attentiveness;
- Letting the written word become a living WORD for me, for us;
- RESPONDING to the personal word or message in prayer and action.

These major steps are those of traditional *lectio divina*: first, *lectio* (what does the text mean in itself?); then, *meditatio* (what is its message for me?); third, *oratio*.
how do I respond in prayer?); finally, contemplatio (looking at life in the light of the word—with the eyes of God, doing what is in conformity with the will of God, changing reality according to the values of God's Kingdom). Contemplation, however, is not really a fourth step but the result or fruit of these three steps.

In the Bible-sharing method, each of these major steps is subdivided into three smaller ones, following each time the same pattern of reading, silent reflection, and sharing with the group. Thus, the method is at times still referred to as the “3RSS” method: three times reading, silence, and sharing. Hence, the same text is read three times. It is the same text, yes, but its understanding becomes richer and deeper step by step due to the threefold silent listening and sharing.

The moments of silence are very important because they are the time of intensive listening. Actually, the term Bible “sharing” could be misleading, as if the main activity would be the sharing, the talking. We became convinced that the essential part of the process is the listening, the silent reflection after each reading and in between the sharings, in order to let the word sink into the soil of the heart. Groups have understood this and learned not to be ill at ease with these moments of silence; instead of becoming shorter, they tend to become longer.

The content of the sharing is different each time. In the first round, striking words, phrases, verses are simply read out loud, without comment. What strikes one person may not touch another. The observation: “I was touched by . . .” may arouse a question in another person’s mind: “Well, what’s so striking about that?” Thus, a question emerges; curiosity is aroused—which are steps towards overcoming the alleged or assumed over-familiarity with the text.

In the second round, after a period of silent listening for about five minutes, the participants share the personal message they have received or perceived: what is meaningful in the text for them, what in the text can they relate to a personal experience in life, what in the text throws light on such an experience, how do they see a certain event in a new light due to the text. Hence, it is not a matter of sharing the message of the text “in itself” (if this exists at all!), but of giving a personal testimony of faith. Hence, it is a rather personal sharing. This kind of sharing is quite in line with and encouraged by the words of Pope Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi: “Is there any other way of handing on the Gospel, than by transmitting to another person one’s personal experience of faith?” (n. 46).
In the third round of sharing, each person expresses aloud in prayer the personal answer to the word he or she has received—be it praise, thanks, contrition, petition, intercession—so that it may be confirmed (expressed aloud or in silence) through the “Amen” of the other participants. This holds good for the so-called prayer-response model. In the action-response model, on the other hand, the participants share how they want to realize, put into practice what they have heard, mindful of the words of the Letter of James: “Be doers of the word and not hearers only” (1:22).

These, then, would be some of the features of this method:

• The structure is rather clear and simple; it can be easily grasped and followed.
• There is a logical sequence and coherence in the succession of the (both major and minor) steps which are easily remembered.
• The method is theologically sound—the letter (or written word), the living, life-related and life-giving word; the response.
• The method is easy to handle. There is no need for an expert in the group.
• The role of the facilitator, then, is not to instruct the group, but to keep the dynamics going. In other words, he or she just indicates the different steps and invites the participants to follow them: to read, to reflect, and to share.
• The method is suitable for small groups, be they a family, neighbors, friends, members of a school class, parish council.

The Basic Bible Seminar as an Introduction to Bible-sharing

The Basic Bible Seminar is described in a handbook for the sake and benefit of those who introduce others to the method of Bible Sharing. It is not a book available in bookstores. From the beginning, the team was convinced that the BBS is not something to be read about, but to be experienced. Hence, the book is given only to the core team members who have undergone the seminar and who will give it to others.

The strategy devised by the team of the John Paul I Bible Center (JPIBC) was to form parish core teams which then would offer the seminar in the parishes and barrios. We went about it like this. In a certain diocese, perhaps on the occasion of the priests’ assembly, we would introduce the clergy to the idea of the seminar. Upon invitation from several parishes in the diocese we would organize a training seminar lasting at least three full days. Parishes that were interested were invited to send a team of at least five people. A good average number of
participants at such seminars would be about thirty to forty people. With them, we would go through the Basic Bible Seminar step by step.

While the staff of JPIBC was conducting the seminar for the core teams, I myself gave a succinct introduction to the BBS to the priests. In fact, we did not accept a team from a parish if the parish priest would not agree to come to a half-day briefing on the seminar. We felt, and experience confirmed us in this, that the parish priest has a vital role to play. He had to have a good grasp of the contents and the method of the BBS in order to give encouragement and guidance to his core team. When the seminar was conducted, his presence would be needed for the solemn opening as well as for the penitential rite, the closing and the commitment rite.

After going through the Basic Bible Seminar as participants, the core team members were given the handbook. On their own, in their home parishes, there would follow a period of assimilating the contents of the seminar, the rehearsing and the planning of the seminars in sections of the parish or in the barrios.

At the level of the barrios, the seminar would usually be given on five consecutive evenings. But depending on the situation, other models are possible. For instance, in the experience in Hong Kong, those who would sign up for the course would commit themselves to participate in all the sessions on five consecutive weekends. Full participation in all the sessions was strictly insisted upon. Those who did not have a complete record of attendance would not be able to graduate.

The Basic Bible Seminar is a dynamic process of an initial and basic familiarization with the Bible. It is a mixture of simple input-conferences, group activities, prayer, and liturgical celebrations. The conferences deal with two basic questions: what kind of book is the Bible and how do we deal with it properly. We always start from what the people already know about the Bible, with whatever general and at times rather confused knowledge they have, and, using the inductive and participatory method, lead them gradually to a better and clearer understanding.

The group activities consist mainly of two types. In the first activity participants are invited to familiarize themselves with the Bible as a book, or rather a library consisting of many books; learning how to locate texts, etc. The main group activity, of course, is the practice of Bible sharing, lectio divina, in common, to which they are introduced step by step. The method is explained to them; they are asked to do it in small groups—without any of the staff members joining.

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During the feedback session they are asked how it went, how they managed to handle the method, what difficulties they met, etc. Hence, the reporting does not concern the content of what had been shared by the group, but how the process was experienced. During the seminar the Bible sharing is done three times. The second and third time, as experience shows, the participants feel more and more at ease with the method, become less and less concerned with doing the steps properly, and concentrate more and more on the listening to and the sharing of the word.

The BBS also contains several activities of prayer and celebration of the word. The solemn enthronement of the Bible in the opening liturgy of the word sets the tone. It impresses visibly on the participants that we are dealing with a very special book. At the same time, they are invited to have the Bible enthroned in their homes—as a constant reminder to “take and read”—like the daily invitation to “take and eat.” The sessions throughout the seminar start and end with a moment of silence, a spontaneous or common prayer, with a suitable hymn. At the end of the seminar, after being confronted for one whole week in a rather intensive way with the word of Scripture, especially listening very profoundly to the personal message in the small lectio divina groups, the participants are ready for a sincere penitential liturgy with the possibility of personal confession. Experience taught us that these confessions are taken so seriously that priests from neighboring parishes often had to be invited to help with hearing the confessions. The climax of the seminar was the celebration of the breaking of the word and the bread in the Eucharist. The first reading chosen for that occasion was Acts 8:26-40, Philip explaining the Scriptures and proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the African pilgrim returning from Jerusalem. The Gospel was Luke 24:13-35, Jesus explaining the Scriptures to the disciples of Emmaus and making himself known to them in the breaking of the bread.

During the eucharistic celebration the participants bring their Bible to the altar. At the end of it, before the blessing, they receive it back. They are reminded once again, that God’s word in sacred Scripture is God’s great gift to them which comes to them through the Church. As they receive it, in gratitude for this great gift, they reply by making a commitment: to have a Bible in a place of honor in the home, to read it regularly and prayerfully, perhaps with the family, to join a Bible sharing group, to attend the Bible seminars or biblical activities offered by the parish, to invite others to such a seminar. In a moment of silent prayer after the penitential service, the participants reflect on these or
other possibilities and make their own choice. After having the Bible handed over to them, kneeling in front of the altar, they make their commitment in public with a clear and loud voice.

**Conclusion**

What has been described here is but one method of Bible sharing with its own characteristic elements and emphases. There are others. None of them is perfect; all of them have their strengths and weaknesses, thus complementing each other. From time to time changes and improvements were introduced. More important than a method are people—like Philip in Acts, like Fr. Carlos Mesters in Brazil who, guided by the Holy Spirit, are able to inspire others and lead them not only to an understanding of a book, but to an encounter with the Risen Lord. What counts is not the method, but that people come in contact with Sacred Scripture. Or, as the Constitution on Divine Revelation says, what counts is that “easy access to Sacred Scripture be provided for all the faithful” (*Vatican II*, n. 22), that people read Scripture prayerfully for their spiritual nourishment (n. 21), and that they come to the “excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8) (n. 25). Thus, the hope of the council fathers may be fulfilled: “Just as the life of the Church grows through persistent participation in the Eucharistic mystery, so we may hope for a new surge of spiritual vitality from intensified veneration for God’s word, which ‘lasts forever’” (Isa 40:8; cf. 1 Pet 1:23-25) (n. 26).

**References**


