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The Year of the Word 2007

Found in translation: How to select a Catholic Bible

By John Osman

What? There is more than one Bible for Catholics?

The New American Bible (NAB), which is the Bible translation we read at Mass, isn't the only English translation used by the Catholic Church. The title of the translation – the New American Bible – tells us that this translation is not used in Canada or Great Britain!

Within the Bible itself we find more than one translation. Ever since the New Testament authors used quotations from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we as Catholics have been using multiple translations. A variety of translations is part of what makes us Catholic.

These multiple English translations of the Bible help us achieve a balance when approaching the word of God.

Is the word of God watered down when we translate it? The popular movie title "Lost in Translation" would indicate as such. But we believe that God can be "found in the translation" just as much as he can be found in the original text.

So how can you "find a translation?"

There are two basic approaches used by translators. When selecting a Bible (or a second Bible!) it is good to know which technique the translation favors. One approach attempts to translate from the original text literally, or "word for word." The other approach, "meaning for meaning," focuses on the meaning of the original text and uses words more familiar to modern readers when creating the translated text.

On one side of the spectrum, those Bibles that tend toward the "word for word" approach are better for study and require additional aides. Those Bibles that are on the extreme "meaning for meaning" end of the spectrum are excellent when we want to focus on the simplicity of the message or for evangelization, since they are so accessible. The ones that strike a balance are good for private prayer and study but also for public reading.

An example of Bibles that are more "word for word" are the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). They are used by the church in teaching and we see them used in our catechisms.

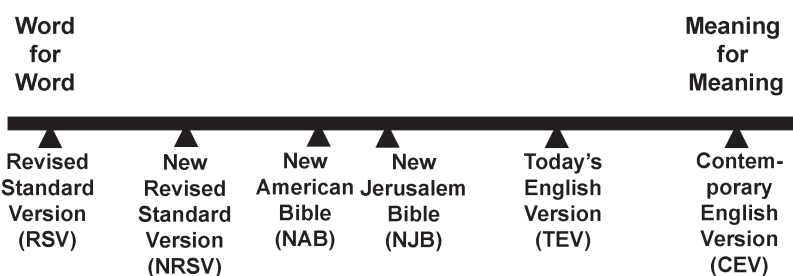
Examples of Bibles that balance the approaches are the NAB and the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB). The popular Protestant Bible, the New International Version (NIV) also falls into this category. The NAB is used in most of our Catholic liturgies. It usually depends on the text but, generally, the NAB leans more towards the literal approach than does the NJB but this is not always the case.

Bibles that are extremely "meaning for meaning" are called paraphrases. Examples of paraphrases are the Today's English Version (TEV) and the Contemporary English Version (CEV). I originally used a TEV, better known as The Good News Bible, when I first began reading the Bible and I use it today for its accessibility. The CEV is used by the church in its children's liturgies. The paraphrases are very important for adults, especially those new to the faith or new to the English language but also for those who need to enjoy the essence of the text.

So when finding a translation first seek to achieve an overall balance. If you are selecting your first Bible, start in the middle of the spectrum with the NAB or the NJB. I would recommend the NJB, since we hear the NAB already at Mass. If you already have one of these, reflect on what you need in order to achieve a better overall balance. Do you need to experience the simple essence of our faith or do you need to experience the wonderment of its complexity?

John Osman is volunteer coordinator of adult faith formation at St. Thomas More Parish in Austin.

Translations of the Bible



Bible translations fall in a continuum, from a "word for word" approach to a "meaning for meaning" approach. (Catholic Spirit graphic)