

position? How can we resist entering the scene ourselves? It is a shame that the music of the "Marcus-Passion" by Johann Sebastian Bach has been lost, given the sublime masterpieces that he drew from the more solemn, ceremonial passion of Matthew, and the mystical one of John.

And then one should return to the Old Testament. One should read the very short book of Jonah, the prophet sent by God to convert and forgive pagan Nineveh, who was swallowed up by a fish and spit out on the third day, a sparkling account woven with fine irony throughout: and then one will understand why Jesus identified himself in the "sign of Jonah," and why Michelangelo painted this prophet, in grandiose form, at the highest point of the altar wall in the Sistine Chapel, between the creation and the judgment, between the beginning and the end of time.

And then one should read the book of Job, which is both grand theology and lofty poetry. And the Song of Songs, an enchanting canticle of love. And then one should again open the New Testament, with the diptych of the Gospel of Luke and of the Acts of the Apostles, with the adventures of Paul who is shipwrecked on Malta, and finally arrives in Rome. We'll never again say that the Bible is boring.

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"The Divine Words Grow With Him Who Reads Them"

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For Marc Chagall, the Bible was the alphabet of colors from which all of Western art had drawn. That's exactly right. Century after century, the artistic fortune of the sacred Scriptures has been so boundless that today, many more people have learned about sacred history from painting, sculpture, architecture, than have read the text. The Bible is the most widely sold book in the world. But few have read the whole thing. Paul Claudel, a French poet and a convert, used to say that "Catholics show tremendous respect for the Bible – they stay as far away from it as possible."

An unforgivable error. Because if it is true that Raphael teaches many things, it is all the more true that the rooms in the Vatican that he frescoed remain undecipherable if one does not know the biblical narrative that provides their substance, if one does not see, for example, that the philosophers of the "School of Athens" are walking toward the heavenly and earthly liturgy of the "Disputation of the Holy Sacrament" painted on the opposite wall. The Bible is the "master code" of Western culture. The greatest literary critics agree on this. In a memorable chapter of "Mimesis," Erich Auerbach demonstrated that Genesis and the Gospels, even more than the Homer's Odyssey, are at the origin of the realism of modern literature: "It was the story of Christ, with its uncalculating combination of everyday reality and lofty, sublime tragedy that repealed the ancient stylistic laws."

Of course, few are able to read the Bible in the original text, which is in Hebrew for the Old

Testament and Greek for the New. But now that the Italian bishops' conference has, after almost twenty years of work on the part of biblical and literary scholars, produced the most accurate Italian translation of the Bible ever, there is yet another reason to read it. This new translation of the Bible, which "L'Espresso" is offering to its readers, is the same that is read every Sunday at Mass. It is therefore made to be proclaimed, sung, accompanied by music, illustrated: like the Vulgate of St. Jerome, the ancient Latin translation of the Scriptures that for centuries was part and parcel of great Western art, and, at the same time, of the everyday life and language of myriads of men and women.

But be careful, the Christian Bible can punish those who venture into it blindly. It is an extremely special book, or rather collection of books, seventy-three in all, produced over a thousand years and divided into two major collections, the Old and the New Testament. These absolutely cannot be separated, at the cost of understanding nothing. The Mass shows why this is. The Gospel is never read without a prior reading from the Old Testament, which anticipates it "in allegory." Jesus is incomprehensible without the prophets. If he is risen from the dead, as the Gospels attest and the "Credo" proclaims, this took place "according to the Scriptures." If blood and water gush from the pierced side of Jesus, it is impossible not to think of the second chapter of Genesis, and the sleeping Adam from whose side God takes Eve, the mother of the living. The cross is the new tree of life of paradise, like the magnificent cross in bloom in the mosaic in the Roman basilica of Saint Clement. It is the fountainhead of the Church, it is the beginning of the new creation.

One should begin by reading Genesis in the Old Testament. It should come as no surprise that there are not one but two accounts of creation, one after the other and very different in style and content. The Bible does not intend to say how the world came about, but why. And also why, in a world that is indeed blessed by God as "good," so much evil should be unleashed, not by destiny but according to free and voluntary choice, disrupting both man and nature. From Cain to Lamech, from the Tower of Babel to the flood, wickedness invades the earth. But there is Noah the just man, in the ark that is saved from the waters. Then there is the calling of another just man, Abraham. And there is also justice beyond the chosen people, in a mysterious Melchizedek, "without father, without mother, without genealogy," as the author of the letter to the Hebrews would write in the New Testament. And there is God who visits Abraham in the person of the three anonymous guests whom Rublev, in the 15th century, would depict as an icon of the Trinity. And again, God who fights with Jacob on the shore of the river Jabbok. God? The Bible doesn't say so. It hints at it. Maybe.

In this, the Bible is truly extremely modern. It never says everything. On the contrary, it requires the reader to enter into the plot and decide. "The divine words grow with him who reads them," Pope Gregory the Great said in a homily on the prophet Ezekiel. It is as if the Scriptures were sleeping, before the reader came to wake them up. They were written this way, full of enigmas, ellipses, narrative leaps, obscurity. Rabbinical exegesis has always been this way: the "midrash" is an inexhaustible accumulation of readings and re-readings, reconstructions and reinterpretations, reality and vision. A painting by Chagall illustrates this perfectly. And the Christian liturgy is the same way: there, the Word of God is not a bookish reading, but becomes a living reality in

the sacramental symbols. The Word of God takes on body and blood.

There is an antiphon, in the Mass for Epiphany according to the Ambrosian rite that is celebrated in Milan, that is a hymn to creativity in approaching the Bible. It sings: "Today the heavenly Bridegroom is joined with his Church, because he has washed her sins in the Jordan. The Magi come with gifts to the royal wedding, and the banqueters rejoice in the water changed into wine. Alleluia!" Here there are at least three references to the Gospels: to the visit of the Magi with gifts for the Child, to the baptism of the adult Jesus in the Jordan, and to the miracle at the wedding in Cana. But the chronological order is completely disregarded, and the narration has been dismantled and reassembled. The wedding becomes that between Jesus and the Church, the baptismal waters purify the bride, the Magi bring gifts to the banquet, and the guests take communion by drinking and miraculous wine obtained by Jesus himself, here and now.

After reading Genesis, one should skip to the New Testament and read Mark, the oldest, shortest, and most folgorante of the four Gospels. Everything hinges on the narrative device of the "messianic secret," a secret glimpsed only in part, in obscurity, the true identity of Jesus, and is revealed only at the end with the words of the Roman centurion in front of the cross: "Truly this man was the son of God!" Another extremely modern element of the Gospel of Mark is the way it is cut off at the end, left in suspense. The one who recognized Jesus was a pagan officer, all of the disciples had fled, and the women who came to the empty tomb didn't say anything to anyone, "because they were afraid." Period. In reading that kind of ending, how is it possible to avoid taking a