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- *Thoughtful Questions* - questions to ask yourself and to bring to prayer

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THE "SENSES" OF SCRIPTURE

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"To this day, in fact, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts, but whenever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed."
2 Corinthians 3:15-16

In this verse, Paul is explaining that Christ opens our minds to truly understand the Sacred Scriptures. One of the signs of our conversion to Jesus is that the scriptures come alive for us. We become aware of a living, growing understanding of God's Word in our lives. This also leads to a new awareness of different layers of meaning or "senses" within the Scriptures.

"According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses." (CCC 115)

The literal sense, as the catechism describes, is the actual meaning conveyed by the words of scripture. The other senses are based on and flow from this literal sense. There is always a literal meaning to a passage of scripture, but that doesn't mean we always take the words of a passage literally. For example, when Jesus tells the people to pluck out their eyes if they are causing them to sin, he is using hyperbole, or poetic exaggeration, to make a point. We aren't to take those words literally and pluck out our eyes. The literal meaning of this passage is, however, that sin is serious and we need to take drastic measures to root it out of our lives. Sacred Scripture includes many styles and types of writing. You will find fiction, metaphor, analogy, poetry and prayer as well as literal and historical works. How do we know which is which? How do we find the literal meaning behind these different styles? We are not all scripture

scholars, so we look to the authoritative teaching of the Church to guide our understanding and lead us in our study.

We rely on footnotes, Catholic study bibles, concordances, commentaries and other aids, always seeking out sound Catholic teaching.

Now we will examine the spiritual senses of scripture and how they help in our interpretation of the Bible. The "allegorical" sense describes how a passage is related to Christ or his Church. In this sense we see how the New Testament was actually hidden within the Old Testament and the Old Testament is revealed in the New. On the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus, unrecognized by the two disciples, "...interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures." (Luke 24:27) Scripture is filled with these allegorical connections between the Old and New Testaments and Jesus himself and the New Testament writers often point out these connections directly. For instance, in John, chapter 6, Jesus referred to the manna, which fed the Israelites in the desert, as prefiguring his own flesh, the true bread of life, which would bring us eternal life. St. Peter tells us in 1Peter, chapter 3, that Noah and the ark "...prefigured baptism, which saves you now". The teaching Tradition of the Church also gives us many examples of the allegorical sense. Referring again to the ark, the Church tells us that it also symbolizes the Church herself, through which we are saved. It was only after Christ's death and resurrection that the veil was lifted and all of these

connections between the Old Testament and the life of Christ and his Church were revealed.



The "moral" sense of Scripture is pretty straightforward in the New Testament.

Christ shows us how we are to live by both his words and example. The Church, however, must sometimes lead us to understand how those teachings apply to our lives in the particular situations of our times. Much of the Old Testament morality is fulfilled and perfected in Jesus' teaching, but we need to be careful to not directly apply all of the Old Testament morality to our present day lives. Some of what we read in the Old Testament seems barbaric, because it was. In those days, God dealt with the people in ways they would understand, but He didn't want to leave them in that state. He was continually preparing them to receive Jesus and the New Testament morality. As Jesus repeated a number of times in the sermon on the mount "You have heard that it was said...but what I say to you...". He made definite changes and advances in the moral understanding of the people of God.

The final "anagogical" sense describes how scripture relates to the four final things...death, judgment, heaven and hell. There are many passages in both the Old and New Testament which speak to our salvation and ultimate destiny. For example, Jesus often gave analogies and parables describing the kingdom of heaven. Even Jerusalem, which

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plays such a large role in all of Scripture, is seen as an image of heaven itself, where Christ's sacrifice is eternally presented to the Father. This anagogical sense is intertwined throughout Sacred Scripture, giving us a dynamic picture of our journey on the narrow path to eternal life.

The point of all of this is not to try to come up with many different interpretations of Scripture, but to expand and deepen our understanding of God's Word to us. None of us will ever fully unlock all of the senses and mystery of the Sacred Scriptures. That is why we can read passages again and again and receive new insights into God's life within us and around us each time. I challenge you...open the Word for yourself and discover Jesus anew each day!

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THE CATECHISM SPEAKS

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church

110 In order to discover the sacred authors' intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current. "For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression."

116 The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of

sound interpretation: All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."

117 The spiritual sense. Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.

1. The allegorical sense. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism.

2. The moral sense. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction."

3. The anagogical sense (Greek: anagoge, "leading"). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Thoughtful Questions

Is the Word of God a living and growing part of my spiritual journey?

Do I seek out the true literal meaning of Sacred Scripture through attention to aids that give the authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church?

Do I recognize the "senses" of Scripture and strive to enter more deeply into the depths of God's Word?

SENSING SCRIPTURE

Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. (John 2:19-21)

The Jews in this passage give witness in the literal sense to the physical existence of the temple in Jerusalem. In the allegorical sense, Jesus is speaking of his own body as the temple.

Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:18-20)

Here Paul shows us that our own bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and gives us the moral sense related to that image.

The main point of what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up. (Heb 8:1-2)

Finally we see that the true tabernacle and sanctuary are not in the earthly temple at all, but in heaven itself. This completes our image of the temple in the anagogical sense.