



The four senses of Scripture

There is an ancient tradition in the church of distinguishing four senses of Scripture: **literal**, **allegorical**, **moral** and **anagogical**. These may sound foreign, but they are basically lenses through which we can read a biblical passage to unlock various meanings and better understand how it can practically speak to our lives.

Literal

1 The literal sense is what the human author intended to convey through words, images, expressions, literary forms, cultural realities, historical circumstances, etc. It does not mean a superficial reading of the text. Rather, it means using all the best tools, like good biblical commentaries, to understand the sacred truth the author sought to communicate — and to avoid reading our own preconceptions into the text. As the catechism notes, “All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal” (CCC 116).

Moral

Sacred Scripture is not just for our information, but even more importantly for our formation: “The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly” (CCC 117). Through the moral sense, we should prayerfully ask, “What should I do in light of this passage?” This is especially important to ask — and answer — through the person of Jesus, the fullness of the Father’s revelation. The moral sense leads us to greater faith and trust in God by not just hearing God’s word but also acting on it.

Allegorical

2 Christians have always recognized how events of the Old Testament correlate with the life of Christ; “thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ’s victory and also of Christian Baptism” (CCC 117). The allegorical sense invites us to see how Christ, the eternal Word of God, is present and prefigured in the Old Testament. It leads us to love Jesus more deeply as we discover him throughout salvation history, from the creation of the world in Genesis to its redemption on Calvary and even to our own time.

Anagogical

“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” (CCC 117). This life determines our eternity. When we realize this, we see how every decision and action is either increasing or decreasing our acceptance of Christ’s offer of eternal life. The anagogical sense leads us to stronger hope as we see the connection between the temporal things of this life and the eternal things of the world to come.

Source: Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg