



A Year of Surprises in the Biblical Institute

By Carol Kloss

Last September, when I first met the 32 Catholic adults who joined the *Biblical Institute of the Diocese of Joliet*, I told them to expect surprises. I knew they all had their own ideas about what they wanted to learn by May, as we met each Saturday morning at St. Mary Immaculate in Plainfield. I also knew the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways when people come together in faith to study God's Word. Judging from what the students have told me about the most significant thing they'd learned this year, the Holy Spirit has indeed been hard at work.

After studying the Old Testament students understood God in a new and more positive way. "I realized the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. He is consistent and loves us and can do great things with failed humans" (Anita Besch, St. Mary Immaculate). "I learned how wonderful, forgiving, loving, and merciful is the Lord of the Hebrew Scriptures. I am no longer fearful of God the Father, but awe-filled" (Carol Pankuch, Holy Spirit). Mary Michalski, St. Mary Immaculate, said most directly what I hope for each student who completes Year One: "My personal relationship with Jesus has always been very strong and now my personal relationship with God (Father) is stronger and more vivid. I am in love most profoundly."

Other BIDJ students found their surprises in the stories they read and the people they met in the eleven books studied in Year One. "I never realized to what extent we worship the God of the Patriarchs...I feel my faith goes much farther back than 2,000 years" (Juli Bednarzyk, St. Mary Nativity). "[I can] relate to the biblical characters' struggles and triumphs with their relationship with God. The story of the Israelites is becoming my story" (Joanne Wilkins, St. Anne). David Fiday, St. Mary Immaculate, describes what I heard from many of the students: "I am beginning to fall in love with the Old Testament stories for their own value. I have always tried to see Christ first [in the Old Testament]. I am relearning a new and profound appreciation for our Old Testament ancestors."

Even the "book-learning" aspects of BIDJ spoke to students in surprising ways. "Looking at the Pentateuch and the books of the Deuteronomistic History together as a complete story, rather than as separate books, has brought a whole new clarity to the message and purpose of the Old Testament" (Susan Nies, St. Petronille). "It's one thing to know the stories, to know names and places. But to truly get an understanding of what the stories mean and what I'm to learn from them, it was important to learn what was happening at that time—the history surrounding the stories" (Toni Higgenbotham, St. Francis Xavier). And from Carol Pankuch: "I can't believe I love doing homework...this time is the best time of my day!"

Perhaps the best surprise was shared by all of us. We began in September as a group of strangers and became by May a faith community. Across the year, we listened to each other in class discussions. We helped each other get better and better at biblical geography. We shared our drawings, songs, poems, reflections, and personal stories. We prayed together, seeking and offering support for our illnesses and accidents, and the dying and deaths of our family members. And most important of all, we gathered faithfully around the Word, searching, learning, hearing, and doing.

We'll gather again in September at St. Mary Immaculate around the foundational books of early Christianity. At St. Petronille in Glen Ellyn, a new group will have the opportunity to be surprised by the God, the stories, and the people of the Old Testament. We need your help to bring new students to both classes.

We've found that what's most useful is simply to let people know about BIDJ—through bulletin announcements and placement of BIDJ brochures and signs. The REO will supply you with everything you need. Thanks in advance for your help in growing this wonderful diocesan resource.

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