

Understanding God's Revelation: A Beginner's Guide to Scripture and Tradition

Introduction: The God Who Reaches Out First

Welcome! At the heart of Christian belief is a profound and encouraging idea: God is not distant or aloof. He desires a relationship with each of us and, in His love, He "makes the first move" to connect with humanity. Understanding how He has done this is one of the most exciting first steps in a mature spiritual life. This document is designed to help you understand the foundational concepts of how God reveals Himself, providing a clear map for navigating some of Christianity's most important ideas.

This divine initiative, this act of God showing Himself to us, is called **Revelation**.

1. What is Divine Revelation?

In simple terms, Divine Revelation is God unveiling truths about Himself and His will for our lives—truths that we could not possibly discover on our own. Using classic arguments from natural reason, we might be able to deduce that a "first cause" or a "prime mover" must exist to account for the universe. But we could never guess the deepest mysteries of God's own inner life without Him telling us about them.

Two perfect examples of this are:

- **The Trinity:** The truth that God is one God in three divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- **The Incarnation:** The truth that God the Son became human in the person of Jesus Christ, the "Word become flesh."

Insight: Revelation isn't just a list of facts or secret information. It is God's answer to the deepest questions of the human heart. He reveals Himself, in the classic words of the Baltimore Catechism, "so that we can know, love, and serve God in this life, so that we can spend eternity with Him in eternal life." It is an invitation into a real, personal relationship with Him.

So, if God has revealed these incredible truths, how have they been passed down faithfully through the centuries?

2. The Two Channels of God's Revelation

God's Revelation is transmitted to us through two distinct but deeply connected channels: Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. They flow from the same divine source—Jesus Christ Himself—and work together to communicate God's truth.

2.1 Sacred Tradition: The Living Voice of Faith

Before anything was written down, the faith was spoken, lived, and passed on from person to person. This is the essence of Sacred Tradition.

The word **Tradition** comes from the Latin word *tradere*, which means "to hand on." Sacred Tradition is the faithful handing on of God's revelation from one generation to the next, a process that began with Jesus's apostles. This creates "an unbroken line of belief and teaching in the church that dates back to the apostles." They experienced Jesus directly, and their teachings and experiences formed an oral tradition that guided the early Church.

Think of it like a family passing down important stories and memories about grandparents and great-grandparents. These stories, shared orally long before they might ever be written in a journal, preserve the living memory and identity of the family. In the same way, the oral tradition of the Church preserved the living memory of Christ.

2.2 Sacred Scripture: The Inspired Word of God

Sacred Scripture—the Bible—developed *from* Sacred Tradition. As the oral tradition was passed on, the Holy Spirit inspired certain individuals to write it down for future generations. The word "inspire" literally means "breathing into," a beautiful image of the Holy Spirit guiding the human authors. For this reason, the Church understands that God is the ultimate author of the Bible.

Here are the key principles of biblical inspiration:

- **Primary Author:** God is the primary author of Scripture. The message is His.
- **Human Instruments:** God worked through human authors, using them as instruments to write His message, much like a writer uses a pencil.
- **Preserved Style:** The human authors were not mere robots. They retained their own unique personalities and writing styles. This is why the Gospels of Mark and John, for example, have different tones and points of emphasis while still communicating God's inspired truth.

The Catholic Bible is composed of 73 books, divided into two main sections:

Structure of the Catholic Bible	Testament	Number of Books	Core Content
Old Testament	46	The story of revelation from creation until the time of Christ.	New Testament
	27	The life of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles, letters, and the book of Revelation.	

2.3 How Scripture and Tradition Work Together

It is essential to understand this key insight: "**Scripture is a product of tradition.**" The living, oral tradition of the Church existed *before* the books of the New Testament were written. The written word emerged from the spoken word. However, this is a two-way relationship: **Tradition is confirmed through Scripture.**

Scripture and tradition are not opposed, but they spring from the one source of Christ, Jesus Himself.

The two work in harmony. Scripture is understood within the context of the living Tradition that produced it. Furthermore, the Bible itself tells us that it doesn't contain every single thing Jesus said and did. As John 20:30 notes, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book."

If Scripture and Tradition are the channels of God's truth, how can we be sure they haven't been distorted or misinterpreted over 2,000 years?

3. The Guardian of Revelation: The Magisterium

To protect His revelation from error, Jesus established a living teaching authority in His Church. This is called the **Magisterium**, a word that comes from the Latin for "teacher." The Magisterium is the official teaching authority held by the Pope and the bishops, who are the successors of the apostles.

The primary role of the Magisterium is to be the faithful servant and safeguard of Scripture and Tradition, ensuring they are interpreted correctly and passed on without error. Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would be with them "until the end of the age" to guide them in this task.

Key Distinction: The Office vs. The Person The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit protects the *official teaching* of the Magisterium from error. This does not mean that individual popes, bishops, or priests are personally perfect or free from sin. History shows many examples of their human failings. The promise of protection applies to the teaching office, not the personal holiness of the men holding it.

A powerful historical example of this protection is the story of St. Athanasius. In the 4th century, a widespread heresy known as Arianism (which taught that Jesus was not truly God) became so popular that a majority of the Church's bishops accepted it. St. Athanasius stood so firm in defending the true teaching that he became a living embodiment of the famous Latin phrase *Athanasius contra mundum* ("**Athanasius against the world**"). Ultimately, the Holy Spirit guided the Church to affirm the correct doctrine at the Council of Nicaea, proving that the truth would be safeguarded even when many of its leaders fell into error.

Safeguarding the truth, however, does not mean our understanding of it remains frozen in time.

4. Our Understanding Grows: The Development of Doctrine

This concept, famously explained by Saint John Henry Newman, is called the **Development of Doctrine**. The core idea is that the truths of revelation given by Jesus do not change, but our *understanding* of them can deepen and mature over time, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Newman was an Anglican priest who, in the process of studying early Church history, came to understand this principle. His deep dive into the roots of Christianity led him to convert to Catholicism and famously conclude: **"to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant."**

A helpful analogy is to imagine that Jesus gave the Church a "big sack of revelation" at the very beginning. Everything is there from the start. Throughout history, the Church continues to pull things out of that sack, look at them in a new light, and understand them more deeply.

For example, at the Council of Nicaea, the Church needed to combat the Arian heresy with precision. To explain the unchanging truth that Jesus is fully God, the council developed new philosophical language, declaring that Jesus is **"consubstantial"** with the Father—meaning He is of the very same substance or being as God the Father. The truth itself wasn't new, but the Church's language and understanding had developed to express it more clearly.

This entire process of God revealing Himself invites a response from us.

5. Our Response to Revelation: The Gift of Faith

The proper human response to God's revelation is **faith**. Faith is not a blind guess or wishful thinking; it is best described as "a sure knowledge of what we can't see."

God's gift of Revelation is so profound because, as St. Thomas Aquinas noted, unaided human reason can only discover truths about God "after much time with great difficulty and a great admixture of error." Revelation is God's clear, reliable, and direct path, saving us from confusion and error. We exercise a natural form of faith every day without thinking about it. For example:

- You have faith that your car is still in the parking lot where you left it.
- You believe that a country like India exists, even if you have never been there, based on the reliable witness of others.

Supernatural faith in God is similar but far more certain. Why? Because the certainty of our faith depends on the reliability of the witness. In Christian faith, our witness is God Himself, "who can neither deceive nor be deceived." This makes the truths of faith the most certain knowledge we can possess.

Faith, therefore, is our confident and grateful "yes" to the God who loved us enough to reveal Himself, providing a knowledge more certain than anything we can see with our own eyes.