

SACRED SCRIPTURE, SACRED TRADITION AND THE CHURCH (C 101-141, USC Ch. 3)

Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition form one sacred deposit of the Word of God which is committed to the Church... The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the Word of God but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on.... with the help of the Holy Spirit: it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (Divine Revelation 10)

In article one on *Divine Revelation*, we saw that *divinely revealed truth*, also called the “deposit of faith” is transmitted from one generation to another through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The Church is the *guardian* and the *authentic interpreter* of this divinely revealed truth. In this article, we will look more fully at how the tripod of Scripture, Tradition and the Church are interrelated and support each other in the task of transmitting, guarding and interpreting the living Word of God.

The Bible: the Church’s book

Until Vatican Council II (1962-1965), the Bible was often seen by some Catholics as a Protestant book. Few Catholics read the Bible. Instead they read the Baltimore Catechism for information on what Catholics believed. Many clergy were afraid to put the Bible into the hands of the ‘simple laity’ in case they would misinterpret it. Thankfully, since Vatican II all this has changed and now Church leaders strongly recommend that the faithful read the Bible for spiritual nourishment and join Bible study groups in order to better understand and appreciate the inexhaustible riches of the Word of God.

The Church inherited from the Israelites, our spiritual ancestors, the 46 books of the Old Testament, and gave birth to the 27 books of the New Testament. In 393 AD at the Council of Hippo, the Church decided which sacred books in circulation should be admitted and not be admitted to the *Canon* of the New Testament (Canon is the term used to refer to the 73 books of the Bible). Catholics trust that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church when she made the very important decision concerning the Canon of the New Testament. It was a decision based on which books best captured the vision and message of Jesus, which books best nurtured the faith of the people. The Church recognized her own image in these books. So without the Church, we would not have a Bible.

Seven extra books in the Catholic Bible

The Catholic Old Testament Canon contains seven books not found in Protestant Bibles. These books are Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach and 1 & 2 Maccabees. In addition, the Catholic Bible has longer versions of the books of Esther and Daniel. Catholics sometimes call these books *deuterocanonical* (meaning “second” canon). Protestants call them *apocryphal* (meaning “counterfeit” or “hidden”). Why the extra books? Space only allows for a brief explanation. The Old Testament books were written in both Hebrew and Greek, the latter having the seven abovenamed books. As the gospel spread to Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles, the Church generally used the Greek edition, also called the Septuagint. When Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, translated the Old Testament in the sixteenth century, he used the Hebrew canon which did not contain the above seven books.

Pause: Was there a time when you didn’t read the Bible? If so, has that changed? What got you interested in reading the Bible?

Scripture interpretation—reading the Bible within the Church (C 109-119, 124-141, USC p. 27)

“In order to discover the sacred author’s 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.”
(C 110)

After reading the above statement, we may be a bit overwhelmed or discouraged about approaching the Bible. We may wonder if we need a degree in biblical studies to read the Bible correctly. We do not.

Just as one does not need to be an expert in musical composition to enjoy music, neither does one need to be an expert in Scripture to enjoy and benefit spiritually from reading the Word of God. If we approach Scripture, especially the Psalms and New Testament, with faith and prayer, we can assume that the Lord will bless our time with his Word. Yet we can also say that just as a course or several courses in musical appreciation will most likely increase our capacity to enjoy music, so will some courses in Scripture increase our understanding and appreciation of God’s Holy Word.

In Acts 8:26-40, there is a lovely account of an encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian. The Ethiopian is reading a passage from the Book of Isaiah. Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian responds: “How can I unless I have someone to guide me?” Then the Ethiopian humbly asks Philip to be his guide. Helped by the Holy Spirit, Philip is able to break open the meaning of God’s word for the Ethiopian. When it comes to understanding and appreciating Scripture, all of us need not only the help of the Holy Spirit but also the help of human guides.

Distinguishing the “intended meaning” from the “apparent meaning” of Scripture

When it comes to reading Scripture, one challenge is to get at the *meaning* of a text *intended by the author*, and distinguish it from the *apparent meaning* of the text. This is where reading Scripture can become a bit challenging for sometimes the *apparent* meaning of a text is not the meaning *intended* by the author.

One example of how the *apparent* meaning could be confused with the *intended meaning* is Genesis chapters 1 & 2. The *apparent* meaning is that God created the world in *seven* days and in the exact manner described therein. But the *intention* of the author was not to give us a scientific account of *how* the world was created. Rather, his intention was *religious, i.e.* to tell us that (a) *God* created the world; (b) God created the world *good*; (c) God created *man* and *woman* in his *image* and *likeness*, and he created them to be *partners* or *helpers* in the journey of life.

In addition to helping us distinguish the *intended meaning* of Scripture from its *apparent* meaning, recent advances in biblical studies can also help us to separate the *timeless Word of God* from the *culturally timebound* passages of Scripture, e.g., when Paul commands slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5) or Paul’s instructions on how women should behave in church (1 Tim 2:9-15). Advances in biblical studies will also help us to deal with some of the violent images of God found in the Old Testament.

As we read the Bible, we must keep in mind that there is an immense historical and cultural gap between the time when the books of the Bible were written and our time. One of the purposes of biblical scholarship is to help us recognize, understand and interpret the various literary forms in which the books of the Bible are written. When reading the newspaper, we approach the editorial page, sports section and cartoons with different mindsets. We can be grateful that we have available to us today many user-friendly resources that make available to us the fruits of advances in biblical studies.

The Holy Spirit who inspired the original authors to write the books of the Bible continues to guide the Church in her role as guardian and interpreter of Scripture. Hence, we do well to read Scripture within our Church community, looking for her guidance as we dig deeper into the inexhaustible treasures of the Bible. (For more information on the Catholic approach to biblical interpretation, see [Article One](#) of my [series](#) on the books of the Bible).

Pause: Can you see why we need not only the help of the Holy Spirit, but also the help of human guides when it comes to growing in our understanding of the Bible? Do you have a favorite Scripture verse or story?

Sacred Tradition (USC p. 23)

The term Tradition is not an easy one to get one’s arms around, mainly because it is used to connote several different things. Yet, understanding Tradition and its role in the *transmission* and *interpretation* of Divine Revelation is very important especially as we dialog with Christians who have what we might call a “Bible only” approach to what God has revealed to us. These are fellow Christians who do not accept the role of Sacred Tradition in the transmission and interpretation of divinely revealed truth. When it comes to the truths of Divine Revelation, they only look to the Bible. In contrast, for Catholics “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are like a mirror in which the pilgrim church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything” (*Divine Revelation* #7). Hopefully, the following will enhance your understanding of Tradition and the important role it plays in the life of our Church.

- The word Tradition literally means “what is handed on.” Tradition refers to the process by which the message of Christ is transmitted from one generation to another. In the early days of Christianity, the transmission of God’s Word occurred through the oral preaching of the Apostles, through the communal and worship life of the first Christians and through anything that contributed to the sanctification of the people (*Divine Revelation* #8).

In the early decades of Christianity, the Word of God (*Divine Revelation*) was not transmitted in *written form* because the books of the New Testament were not yet written. And after they were written, they were not available to all of the Christian communities, and they were not intended to contain *all* that Jesus said and did. John ends his gospel with these words: “*There are many other things that Jesus did, but if they were to be described individually, I do not think that the whole world would contain the books that would be written*” (21:25).

When the books of the New Testament were written, they became an invaluable and infallible source of Divine Revelation. But Divine Revelation also continued to be passed on *orally* and in the communal and worship life of the Church. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes: “*Hold the teachings that you have learned whether by word or letter of ours*” (2:15). When the term Tradition is used in the context of the early decades of Christianity, it is referred to as *Apostolic Tradition* because of its closeness to the time of the Apostles.

- In time, Sacred Tradition came to include the *writings of the early Church Fathers*. These writings are very important for a true and authentic understanding of God’s Word (both oral and written) because these men lived and wrote in the generations after the apostles. They were the recipients of what we called above *Apostolic Tradition*. They wrote and interpreted it for the people of their time. We can safely say that any interpretation of God’s Word that ignores the writings of the early Church Fathers is on shaky ground. When one reads today the stories of what is leading a significant number of Protestant ministers to journey home to the Catholic Church, one will quickly see that a big factor in their journey is the study of the early Church Fathers. (For more on this, see the *Journey Home* program on EWTN TV/Radio and the *Surprised by the Truth* books. For more information on the Fathers of the Church, see *The Fathers of the Church - An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers* by Mike Aquilina.)

- *Creedal statements of faith by early Church councils also became a part of Sacred Tradition*. As aspects of Christian belief were erroneously or falsely interpreted, the Church formulated creedal statements of faith like the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. Such creedal statements helped the faithful to steer clear of false teachings and profess what was true doctrine.

Pause: What if anything did you underline? What spoke to you?

- The *dynamic element of Sacred Tradition*. The Catholic understanding of Tradition not only refers to a set of Christian beliefs received from the past, it also refers to how the Church throughout the centuries has, through prayer and study, *grown in her understanding* of what is passed on and handed down from one generation to another. This *growth in understanding* is always a “growth from partial to fuller vision, so what was believed continues to be believed, though its depths and consequences are more fully realized” (*The Teaching of Christ*, p.218). Each of us personally participates in this *growth in understanding* of our Catholic faith whenever we take time to study and contemplate it.

For our global Church family, Vatican Council II and the years following it was a wonderful experience of growth in understanding Sacred Tradition. At the Council, the bishops aided by brilliant and dedicated theologians (and the Holy Spirit) came to a deeper understanding of every aspect of the Church’s life. This *growth in understanding* led to a host of new practices such as a greater involvement of the lay faithful in the liturgy and the life of the Church. We started to relate to and pray with other Christian churches and even with non-Christian religions. Our attitude towards the world was more open and less defensive.

Another aspect of Sacred Tradition is that Catholic beliefs that are only found in *seed form* in Scripture later blossomed as the Church continued to meditate on Scripture. Examples of this are beliefs about Mary (Art. 10) and about Purgatory (Art. 11).

- Having stated how some beliefs in our Church only fully developed over the centuries, it is very important to note that for Catholics, nothing in Tradition can be contrary to what is contained in the Bible. In fact, the Church must often examine her beliefs and practices in the light of Sacred Scripture. Having said that, it is also important to note that for Catholics, a belief or practice is only considered *non-scriptural* if it contradicts or is not in harmony with Scripture. For example, the pastoral practice of baptizing infants is not explicitly stated in the Bible. But neither is it forbidden. It is implied in Acts which speaks of whole households being baptized (Acts 16:33).

- The term Tradition is also used to refer to the whole *milieu in which the Scripture emerged and how the Church has interpreted* the Word of God down through the ages. It is a bit like the American Constitution. Scholars of the Constitution would not dream of interpreting it outside the context in which it was born or without studying how scholars have understood this document in the past 200 years. Of course, the one big difference in this analogy is that the Supreme Court does not have the Holy Spirit to guide it, whereas Jesus did promise the Holy Spirit to the Church to lead her to a greater understanding of his message and life (Jn 16:13).

- *Distinguishing Tradition from human traditions*. As we use the term Tradition, it is important that we distinguish it from human traditions (sometimes called tradition with a small ‘t’). The latter refers to man-made rules, customs and practices that are connected to core teachings of the Church but are not in themselves core Church teachings. For example, Catholic belief in the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine at Mass is a core Church teaching that cannot be changed. But *how* we celebrate the Mass belongs to human tradition. It

can change from generation to generation. The Mass can be said in Latin or in the language of the people. People can receive Holy Communion in their hand or on their tongue. The sacrament of Holy Orders belongs to Tradition with a large ‘T’. The Church has no authority to state that it will no longer have this sacrament. But the practice of mandatory celibacy for all seeking ordination is a human tradition or belongs to tradition with a small ‘t’. The Church could and has ordained married men. When Jesus condemned traditions in the Bible (Mt 23), he was condemning human traditions that were an obstacle rather than a help to people in their relationship with God.

Pause: What did you underline or what spoke to you above?

The role of the Church

When it comes to the transmission and interpretation of Divine Revelation, the role of the Church is to be protector and interpreter of God’s Word. We can say that the Church’s role is twofold: to protect the deposit of faith from false and erroneous interpretations (Acts 20:28-32) and to draw forth a deeper understanding of the spiritual treasures found in Divine Revelation.

When it comes to the Church protecting the deposit of faith from false interpretations and discovering its rich treasure, the lay faithful, theologians and the Church’s Magisterium each has a valuable role to play.

The lay faithful. In the fifth century in Constantinople, Bishop Nestorius started to preach that Mary was not *Theotokos* (the Greek word for “Mother of God”) but only the mother of the human Jesus. The lay faithful virtually revolted against their bishop’s heretical teaching. When the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and declared Mary the Mother of God, believers took to the streets enthusiastically chanting, “Theotokos! Theotokos!”

In our own time, we can say that the lay faithful involved in the Charismatic Renewal movement have helped our whole Church rediscover a new appreciation for the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

Theologians. Every era of the Church, beginning with the early Church Fathers, have been blessed with holy and brilliant theologians who have helped the whole Church come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Catholic beliefs. The wonderful fruits of Vatican Council II were largely due to dedicated theologians who, in the decades previous to the Council, were germinating many of the wonderful insights that eventually filled the documents of the Council.

The Magisterium. Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit enables the bishops in union with the pope to recognize God’s Revelation. The Magisterium is a living source of discernment for our Church family. When it comes to the protection and interpretation of Divine Revelation and the life of the Church, the role of the Magisterium (the bishops’ teaching in union with the Pope) is that of a watchdog of orthodoxy (right belief). Down through the ages, great theological battles have taken place concerning Church beliefs and practices. Sooner or later, it is the role of the Magisterium to step in and proclaim what theological opinions, pastoral practices or devotions are faithful or unfaithful to Sacred Tradition. (Hence the saying: *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*, or “Rome has spoken, the case is closed.”) A recent example of this is the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood. After much debate, the late John Paul II firmly stated that the Church had no authority to ordain women to the priesthood (more on this issue in Article 17 on Holy Orders). Since the beginning of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, Christianity has been divided into hundreds of new churches usually concerning the interpretation of Scripture. One of the inherent strengths of Catholicism is the ministry of the Pope who works with the Magisterium to protect the unity of our faith. Having a Bible without the Magisterium is like having a Constitution without the Supreme Court.

Pause: Any questions or comments? What might you have underlined?

Suggested action

If you are not a student of the Bible, consider purchasing a commentary on one or more books of the Bible to help your study. Or consider getting a daily devotional like *The Word Among Us* which has the readings used at daily Mass with a brief reflection on one of the two readings. (Tel. 1-800-775-9673)

Meditation

It is clear, therefore, that Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (Dei Verbum 10)

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