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## TAKING GOD AT HIS

### WORD:

## A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF BIBLICAL INERRANCY

### ISSUE

Does the Catholic Church teach biblical inerrancy? What is meant by the word “inerrancy”?

### RESPONSE

Yes, “inerrancy” simply means the state of being free from error. The Catholic Church has always taught that Sacred Scripture is inerrant. The reason is that all the books of the Bible were composed by human authors who were “inspired” by the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; 3:15-16). Therefore, they truly have God as their author, and communicate without error our heavenly Father’s saving truth.

### DISCUSSION

Christians are scandalized today when they hear someone say that Jesus didn’t really multiply the loaves and fish for the 5,000 people on a hillside in Galilee. It has been said that this Gospel account in Jn. 6:1-14 was merely a story made up by the early Christian community in order to express Christ’s message on the importance of sharing and serving those in need. The story of Jesus’ miraculously multiplying loaves and fish probably was not an actual event that occurred in history.

This type of interpretation of the Bible has cast doubts over the trustworthiness of the Scriptures: Is the Bible a fully reliable source of truth? Or is it merely a collection of writings containing some religious truths alongside a number of exaggerations, errors, and fabrications?

### WHAT DOES THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TEACH?

The Catholic Church teaches that the Scriptures are truly the Word of God. Through the Bible, God unveils Himself, communicates His plan of salvation and calls us to a relationship with Him.

The Church has long taught that we can approach the Scriptures with a rock-solid confidence

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because they are inspired by God Himself and therefore contain no error. This inerrancy is a great gift because it gives the Bible a credibility on which we can base our lives. God inspired the Scriptures in order to give us a fully trustworthy source about what we are to believe and how we are to act. When read within the Church’s living tradition and magisterial teaching, the Bible is a sure guide for our lives.

The basis for the Church’s teaching on biblical inerrancy is inspiration. Here, we must remember that the Bible is different from any other book. It is

unique because it has a unique author: God Himself. As St. Paul says,

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Inspiration literally means “God-breathed.” This is why the Church teaches that the Scriptures “have God as their author.” God worked through human writers who “consented to writing everything and only those things which He wanted” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 11). Thus, while the human writers made full use of their own powers and abilities, they were at the same time inspired by the Holy Spirit so that the words of Scripture are written exactly the way God Himself intended. Indeed, the Scriptures contain the very words of God expressed in the words of men (*Dei Verbum*, nos. 13, 16).

Since the words of Scripture are inspired by God Himself, the Church has always taught that every part of the Bible is without error. Otherwise “error” in the Bible would have to be attributed to God, who is Supreme Truth and “can neither deceive nor be deceived.”

Pope Leo XIII in the 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* explained:

“so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church.”

Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the inerrancy of the Bible in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. He compared Scripture’s inerrancy to Christ’s sinlessness: “For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error” (no. 37).

Vatican II and the Catechism of the Catholic Church also teach that God’s inspiration of the

Scriptures leaves no room for any error in the Bible: “Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 11 cited in Catechism, no. 107).

### IS INERRANCY LIMITED TO MATTERS OF FAITH AND MORALS?

Despite these explicit statements on biblical inerrancy, some have taught that the Scripture’s inerrancy is restricted only to “religious matters,” arguing that the Bible is without error only when it talks about matters of faith and morals. However, regarding non-religious matters of history or “background details,” these critics argue that God may permitted human errors to coexist with more important religious truths.

But this position repeatedly has been refuted by the Church because it necessarily limits God’s inspiration of the sacred texts. Leo XIII explained inspiration and inerrancy cannot be restricted only to religious matters of the Bible. “[I]t is absolutely wrong and forbidden either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. As to the system of those who . . . do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals, and nothing beyond . . . this system cannot be tolerated.” The Bible must therefore be inerrant not only in “religious truths,” but in all its intended affirmations.

Pope Benedict XV in *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920) also emphasized the Bible’s absolute immunity from error. He went so far as to say that “belief in the biblical narrative is as necessary to salvation as is belief in the doctrines of the Faith.” After explicitly condemning any position which restricts inerrancy only to so-called “religious” elements of the Bible, he cites St. Jerome, the “Father of Biblical Science,” who wrote more than 1,500 years ago that “[i]t would be wholly impious to limit inspiration to

certain portions only of Scripture or to concede that the sacred authors themselves could have erred.”

### AVOIDING LITERALISTIC INTERPRETATION

This is not to say that everything in the Bible is meant to be understood literally. It is important to note that the Church teaches the Bible is inerrant in all that the sacred writers intended to affirm. We must therefore consider the author’s intention and the literary genre of a text. A literalistic approach disregards this. For example, when Christ warns that it is better for you to cut your hand off if it causes you to sin (Mk. 9:43), He is using a literary metaphor. However, a literalistic reading would take this teaching of Christ at face value and wrongly encourage cutting off portions of the body that cause one to sin! Similarly, when Ps. 73:20 speaks of God awakening, this is not meant to teach that Yahweh actually sleeps at night and gets up in the morning, but rather this is figurative language describing how God, after remaining apparently unresponsive to a situation, begins to take action like a man awaking from sleep.

When it comes to matters of natural science, the Church teaches that the sacred authors did not necessarily intend to teach physics, astronomy, or chemistry. For example, when the Scriptures describe the sun moving around the earth (Josh. 10:12-13, Ps. 19:6-7, Eccles. 1:4) or the moon as being larger than the stars in the sky (Gen. 1:16), the sacred writers were not intending to give astronomy lessons. A literalistic approach would have to deny the modern scientific data showing that the earth revolves around the sun and that distant stars are larger than the moon.

However, the writers were intending to report what appeared to their senses, and did so accurately.

As Pope Leo XIII explained, “they did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time. . . . Ordinary speech primarily and properly describes what comes under the senses; and somewhat in the same way the sacred writers . . . went by what sensibly appeared.”

We commonly speak this way. When the weatherman says the sun will rise tomorrow at 6 a.m., we do not accuse him of a great astronomical error. He is accurate in his statement because he is not intending to teach about the movement of the sun, but to tell us about what appears to our senses by using common figurative language. Likewise, the above biblical texts describing the sun rising and the moon’s size are inerrant. The sacred writers reported without error what they intended to report—not natural science, but what really appeared to the senses.

These principles can be used for demonstrating the inerrancy of other biblical passages which are often accused as being erroneous in light of modern science.

### TAKING GOD’S WORD SERIOUSLY

Similarly, when it comes to matters of history, we must consider the writer’s intention. If the writer is intending to offer an historical narrative, then the entire presentation must inerrantly report what actually occurred in history. But the case is different if the writer is intending to use an allegory or parable. For example, the story of “the good Samaritan” (Lk. 10:29-37) was not necessarily intended to tell about an actual event in history. Rather, Jesus used this as a parable to clarify His teaching. Thus, we don’t have to believe that there was an actual “Good Samaritan.” But, since Luke’s Gospel reports that Jesus told this story to a lawyer, we do have to believe that Jesus actually told the Good Samaritan parable to the lawyer in the way St. Luke reported.

The same holds true for the account of the multiplication of the loaves and fish (Jn. 6:1-14). Since the passage is a historical narrative about Jesus multiplying loaves and fish (Jn. 6:1-14), we know that it inerrantly reports what actually occurred happened. It is not a legend arising out of the early Christian community. It is not an exaggerated story based on partial truths. Since the sacred writer intended to narrate an event in Christ’s life, the entire narrative in all its parts must be inerrant, communicating truthfully all the author intended to affirm since “everything asserted by the

inspired authors . . . must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit” (Dei Verbum, no. 11).

Here we can see that even the smaller details of an historical narrative are significant. Thus, we know that Jesus multiplied the food from five barley loaves and two fish, and then twelve baskets of bread fragments were left over, just as the narrative tells us. What may appear as mere “background information” is important because even these details are inspired by God and thus must be true. If a sacred writer could err on “smaller details” surrounding Jesus’ life, how could he be trusted in reporting larger matters which are much more difficult to believe, such as the Resurrection? Further, we must keep in mind that historical accuracy of a testimony was important for the Jews (see Susannah’s trial in Dan. 14 and the accounts of Jesus’ trial before the high priest in which he could not be condemned because of false testimonies which “did not agree”).

### CONTRADICTIONS IN THE BIBLE?

Some may say that there are contradictions within the Bible itself and conclude that the Bible cannot be 100% inerrant. For example, in Mk. 2:26 Jesus says Abiathar was high priest when David ate the bread of the Presence, but 1 Sam. 21:1 says Ahimelech was the priest at that time. On the surface this seems to be a blatant contradiction. However, when we realize that Abiathar was the son of Ahimelech (1 Sam. 23:6) and that the High Priesthood was shared by a father and a son (Lk. 3:2; Jn. 18:13), we see that Jesus’ statement (as recorded by St. Mark) is accurate. 1 Sam. 21:1 and Mk. 2:26 are both accurate—both Ahimelech and Abiathar were called high priest as father and son.

There are dozens of other difficult passages in the Bible which may appear on the surface to be erroneous or contradictory—many of which can be easily demonstrated as reconcilable and a few which are a little more difficult to understand. But we must keep in mind that God put difficulties in the sacred texts in order to humble us, so that we may trust more in God’s inspiration of the Scriptures than in our own ability to study them. Pope Pius XII wrote: “God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more intently, and, experiencing in a salutary manner our own limitations, we might be exercised in due submission of mind.”

In the end, the Church calls us to adopt a reverential attitude toward the Scriptures. St. Augustine would never accuse the sacred writers of the slightest mistake, even in the smallest details. When he came across difficulties in the Bible—difficulties which even his great intellect could not resolve—he did not conclude that there was an error in the Bible. Rather, he humbly accepted the difficult texts as true because he was humble enough to recognize his own limitations in the face of the inspired and inerrant Word of God. He wrote:

On my own part I confess to your charity that it is only to those books of Scripture which are now called canonical that I have learned to pay such honor and reverence as to believe most firmly that none of their writers has fallen into any error. And if in these books I meet anything which seems contrary to truth, I shall not hesitate to conclude either that the text is faulty [a defective copy of the Bible], or that the translator has not expressed the meaning of the passage, or that I myself do not understand.

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