

## UNDERSTANDING CATHOLICISM 1: GOD SPEAKS TO HIS CHILDREN

### I. God talks with his Children

A. God's amazing love propels him to reveal himself and the marvelous destiny he has planned for his earthly creatures. The book of Hebrews informs us:

“In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1:1-2).

1. In these divine communications, God speaks.
2. We are called to listen and respond faithfully as the deepest truth about God and our salvation shines out for us in Christ, who in himself is both “the mediator and the sum total of Revelation.”<sup>1</sup>

B. This Divine Revelation comes to us in two forms:

1. Orally (**Tradition**) communicated to the prophets of the Old Testament, and the apostles in Christian era.
2. Written (**Scripture**) - The Holy Spirit inspired men to write the love letters that make up the Bible.
3. Let's examine each of these two sources.

### II. Let's Examine Tradition (Sacred Tradition, Apostolic Tradition)

A. The word “tradition” (*paradosis* in Greek) refers truths that are “handed down.”<sup>2</sup>

1. The Bible uses the word “tradition” in two senses:
2. It can merely refer to human *customs*; or it can identify *divine revelation*.

B. The Bible never rejects the authenticity of Sacred Tradition, but it does condemn those customs (traditions) that either:

1. Violate God's commandments (Mt 15:1-9; Mk 7:1-15) or in the words of St. Paul
2. Teach “philosophy and empty deceit” (Col 2:8) that is contrary to the teaching of God's revelation. Sadly, this has become common today.

C. The Church teaches that Sacred Tradition was faithfully *handed on* to the apostles and then “to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.”<sup>3</sup> St. Paul describes this process in his first letter to the Corinthians:

1. “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the *traditions* just as I *handed them on* to you” (1 Cor 11:2).
2. “For I *received from the Lord* what I also *handed on* to you” (1 Cor 11:23).

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 595.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 81 henceforth cited as CCC.

In the context of this last passage, Paul instructs the Corinthians on the seriousness of receiving the Blessed Eucharist worthily because it is the Body and Blood of Jesus.

D. Scripture and Tradition form *one sacred deposit* of God's revelation<sup>4</sup> because the Bible springs from God's oral instruction as from a source written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

E. St. Paul affirms Sacred Tradition:

1. "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the *traditions* which you were taught by us, either by *word of mouth* or by *letter*" (2 Thess 2:15).

Notice that St. Paul teaches that Tradition, his oral teaching, and his inspired letters form one source that Christians are to hold firmly.

2. Subsequently, he wrote: "Now we *command* you, beloved, in the *name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the *tradition* that you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6).

Paul commands Christians in strong language to faithfully follow the traditions they were taught. This command is as binding today as it was in the first century.

3. St. Paul also identified his oral instruction as the "word of God":

"And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the *word of God* which you *heard* from us, you received it not as the word of men but as what it really is, *the word of God*, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2:13).

4. In his instruction to Timothy, St. Paul also emphasizes the importance of Sacred Tradition:

a. "For this gospel I was appointed a *preacher* and an *apostle* and a *teacher*" (2 Tim 1:11).

b. Then he instructed: "Follow the pattern of sound words which you have *heard* from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been *entrusted to you* by the Holy Spirit who dwells within you" (2 Tim 1:13-14).

c. Finally, he admonished Timothy to pass on the truths as he was taught by appointing successors:

"You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have *heard* from me before many witnesses *entrust* to faithful men who will be able *to teach other* also" (2 Tim 2:1-2).

### III. The New Testament Uses Tradition

The following are a few examples from many that illustrate the New Testament's use of Tradition:

\*1 Cor 10:4 - "All drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ."

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<sup>4</sup> Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, 9.

In this passage, St. Paul shows that the Christian sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist were prefigured in the Old Testament. However, the Old Testament says nothing about a rock that followed the Israelites in the desert (Ex 17:1-7; Num 20:2-13). In contrast, there was a rabbinic tradition that the rock followed the Jews on their journey in the desert, and another tradition that equates this rock with preexistent Wisdom.

\**Jude 9* - "When the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon [him], but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'"

In relating this altercation between Michael and Satan, St. Jude relies on oral tradition, not the Old Testament.

\**2 Tim 3:8* - St. Paul draws upon Tradition to supply the names of the magicians who opposed Moses in Pharaoh's court, namely, "Jannes and Jambres" (cf. Ex 7:8f).

\**10. Lk 1:1-4* – St. Luke informs us that the source of his Gospel was oral tradition: "Just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word."

\**Acts 7:52-53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2-3* - The Law came through angels, not directly from God. This Jewish Tradition is found in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* and *Book of Jubilees*, but it is not found in the Old Testament.

#### IV. Let's Consider the Practice of the early Church

- A. Some Christians have the erroneous idea that Christianity was spread in the ancient Church through Bible studies. This is historically false for as number of reasons, the chief of which is the book that we now call the Bible did not yet exist. We will discuss this later.
- B. The evidence is clear that "the spread of Christianity was achieved by *preachers*, not writers. For almost a generation the memories of Christ's life and teaching were kept by *oral tradition*."<sup>5</sup> It is historically irrefutable that the Christian faith was established and passed on well into the second century by means of *oral tradition* and *not writings* [New Testament].<sup>6</sup> In this way the apostles were faithful to the commission they received from Jesus to preach the Gospel to all nations.  
That message rings as true today to hearts longing for God as it did on Pentecost when Peter preached the first sermon. He proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Savior, who was

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<sup>5</sup> McDonald, Lee, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, pp. 137-138; Farmer and Farkasfalvy, *Formation of the New Testament Canon*, p. 110 (emphasis mine).

<sup>6</sup> McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, pp. 138-154 (emphasis mine).

crucified, died and rose from the dead. Jesus came to call us to repent so our sins can be forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, so we can be saved from “this crooked generation” (Acts 2:14-42). This message is so powerful that it converted the pagan Roman world in a few centuries.

- C. The Baptist scholar Lee McDonald also confirms: “The church had an *oral tradition* concerning God that was taught and proclaimed in the early communities of faith (Acts 2:42; 4:33; 6:4) alongside the scriptures of Judaism [the Old Testament].”<sup>7</sup>

When heresies arose, he explains how the Church defended the authentic Gospel: “This was done at first by the ‘rule of faith’ that appears to have embodied the *oral tradition* about God, but eventually also by the rule of certain writings that were believed to transmit faithfully the tradition of God.”<sup>8</sup>

- C. The internationally respected Protestant scholar, J.N.D. Kelly, also testifies to the vital role of Tradition in the early Church: “When asked where the authentic faith was to be found, their answer was clear and unequivocal: in a general way it was contained in the Church’s *continuous tradition* of teaching, and more concretely in the Holy Scriptures. These were in fact *the twin* - as we shall see, overlapping - authorities to which Christians looked for the confirmation of their beliefs.”<sup>9</sup>

**There are Important Truths Taught in Tradition, but not Explicitly Taught in the Bible**

- The determination of the books that belong in the Bible.
- The sanctity of human life from the moment of conception.
- The belief that public revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle.
- Changing the Lord’s Day from Saturday to Sunday.
- The prohibition against polygamy (more than one spouse at the same time).

## V. Now Let’s Take a More In-depth Look at Sacred Scripture - God’s Love Letters

### A. Division

1. The Bible has two major divisions. One is called the Old Testament; the other is called the New Testament.
2. The word *testament* comes from the Latin *testamentum*, which means “covenant”.
3. A **covenant** (*berith* in Hebrew, *diatheke* in Greek) is “a kinship bond between two parties, with conditions or obligations, established by an oath or its equivalent.”<sup>10</sup>
  - a. The covenant is the great biblical theme that runs through the entire Bible showing the process of how God established a family tie with humanity.

<sup>7</sup> *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, p. 11 (emphasis mine).

<sup>8</sup> *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, p. 17 (emphasis mine).

<sup>9</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, “Covenant”, p. 168

- b. The terms “family bond” and “marriage” are often used to convey the meaning of the covenant. Therefore, the covenant is far more than the idea conveyed by the word “contract.”
4. The division of Old and New Covenant is given by St. Paul (2 Cor 3:6, 14).
  5. The Old Testament prepares the way for Jesus, and looks to his coming. The New Testament reveals the fulfillment in Christ. As St. Augustine explained: “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.”<sup>11</sup> For example, at the dawn of civilization God pledged in the first book of the Bible that a “woman’s seed” (a son) would utterly defeat Satan. The New Testament reveals that this “seed” is the divine Son of God who assumed human nature and conquered the devil by his self-sacrificing love.
  6. The Old Testament gives a sequence of covenants God advanced through the mediation of **Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses,** and **David** who together with the prophets prepared God’s chosen people for the coming of Jesus.
    1. Throughout history, God uses human mediators to become involved in the family business of the Blessed Trinity which is the salvation of souls.
    2. This calling continues today, for example, in parents who are commissioned to train their children for paradise.
  7. The New Testament focuses on the definitive covenant made through **Jesus Christ** (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25).
- B. Let’s consider the Old Testament in more detail.
1. When the New Testament refers to “the scriptures”<sup>12</sup> it is not a reference to the Bible, but to the 46 books of the Old Testament. The New Testament, of course, was not yet completed.
  2. The most important translation of the Old Testament was the Septuagint.
    - a. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament carried out between the third and first centuries B.C.
    - b. The word “Septuagint” comes from the Latin word meaning “seventy,” so named because seventy scholars allegedly made this ancient translation.
    - c. It is often identified by the Roman numerals for seventy: LXX.
    - d. Why is it Important?
      - (1) Eighty-five percent of all the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are drawn from the Septuagint.

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<sup>11</sup> CCC, # 129.

<sup>12</sup> Mt 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56; Mk 14:49; Lk 4:21; 22:37; 24:45; Jn 10:35; 13:18; 17:12; 19:24; 20:9; Acts 1:16; 18:24, 28; Rom 4:3; 1 Cor 15:4; 2 Tim 3:16.

(2) Almost all of the Church Fathers regarded the Septuagint as the standard form of the Old Testament Scriptures. St. Augustine even thought this translation was divinely inspired.

C. There are 46 Books that make up the Old Testament:

#### **Pentateuch (5)**

**Genesis** (“Origin”): Focuses on the creation of the cosmos and humans in Adam and Eve, their Fall, and the formation of a chosen people via Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Exodus** (“Going out”): Narrates the escape from Egypt, the covenant God made on Sinai through Moses, and its renewal after the apostasy of the Golden Calf.

**Leviticus** (“pertaining to the Levites”): Lists Laws regarding: ritual purity, holiness, atonement, worship, and religious observance.

**Numbers**: Begins with a census and covers the period from the exodus and the desert wandering, to just outside the Promised Land.

**Deuteronomy** (Second law): Provides details of the second covenant God made through Moses.

#### **Historical Books (16)**

**Joshua**: Describes entrance into the Promised Land and its conquest.

**Judges**: Goes from the death of Joshua to the prophet Samuel depicting a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and forgiveness.

**Ruth**: Story of the faithful Moabite woman who became the ancestor of David.

**1 & 2 Samuel**: Depicts the monarchy focusing on the prophet Samuel, and the kings Saul and David.

**1 & 2 Kings**: Covers the period from the end of David’s reign to the exile.

**1 & 2 Chronicles**: Provides a survey from the creation to the Babylonian exile.

**Ezra**: Describes the events of the remnants’ return from exile.

**Nehemiah**: Narrates rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the effort to restore Jerusalem to its former glory.

**Tobit**: Tells how the angel Raphael helped the marriage of Sarah and Tobit during the Assyrian exile.

**Esther**: This is a narrative of how Esther saved her people during exile by the Persian empire.

**1 & 2 Maccabees**: Chronicles the struggle of the Jews under Judas Maccabeus and his family against persecution of the Seleucid kings in second century B.C.

**Judith**: Describes how God defeats evil through the courage of a pious woman.

### Major Prophets (4)

**Isaiah:** Is the most quoted of the prophets in the New Testament. It provides profound spiritual insights and gives the most details about the coming Messiah. Isaiah predicts the birth of the Messiah who will be called: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Is 9”:6). He also predicts that at the Messianic banquet there will be “choice wines,” (Is 25:6) anticipating the Eucharist.

**Jeremiah:** Longest book in the Bible. It warns of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, but give hope in the coming of a new covenant.

**Ezekiel:** Is written in Babylon. It tells how the exiles are to understand the fall of Jerusalem, judgment and coming salvation.

**Daniel:** Tells of the trials and triumphs of Daniel and his companions who are in exile in Babylon. It also looks to the future glory of Israel with the coming of the Messiah.

### Minor Prophets (14)

**Amos:** Oracles given in Judah, but addressed to kingdom of Israel.

**Hosea:** This touching narrative compares the infidelity of Hosea’s wife Gomer to the infidelity of God’s people. Speaking of the coming Messiah, it predicts: “I will espouse you for ever; I will espouse you in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will espouse you in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2:19-20).

**Lamentations:** Mourns over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the exile that followed.

**Micah:** Attacks the injustice and corruption of priests, prophets, officials and the people in the kingdom of Judah, and announces the coming punishment they bring upon themselves.

**Baruch:** Baruch was Jeremiah’s companion and secretary. The book focus on God’s righteousness, justice, and a better future if the people will return to God.

**Zephaniah:** Amid idolatry, superstition, and degradation, this book is a call to remain faithful. It announces that judgment will come, but a holy remnant will be spared.

**Nahum:** This book is a prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh and overthrow of Assyrians by Babylon.

**Habakkuk:** Gives an understanding of divine punishment as the Babylonian exile is approaching.

**Haggai:** Encourages the returning exiles to remain faithful in rebuilding the Temple.

**Zechariah:** Urges the returning exiles to have faith while rebuilding the Temple. They are comforted with the message that the Messiah will bring peace to the nations.

**Malachi:** These oracles are a call to repentance and commitment as they look to the “pure offering” coming in the future.

**Obadiah:** Is the shortest book in the Old Testament consisting of 21 verses. It condemns the Edomites who are the enemies of Jews returning from the Exile.

**Joel:** Calls the people to public repentance as the Day of the Lord is coming.

**Jonah:** Teaches that God even wishes the conversion of the Gentiles. No one is outside of his love and care.

### Wisdom (7)

**Job:** Grapples with the issue of a just man suffering.

**Psalms:** These 150 religious songs were used in the Temple liturgy. They cover all the human emotions and are a masterwork of prayer. David was responsible for 73 of the psalms. Jesus prayed the psalms and quoted them on the Cross, for example, Psalm 22:1 when he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and Psalm 35:5 “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

**Proverbs:** Wise sayings to inspire moral living as opposed to a life of folly.

**Song of Songs:** This beautiful love poetry depicts the intimacy between God and his people. Christians read it as a description of the love between the Heavenly Husband’s and his bride, the Church.

- “Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth” (v. 1)
- St. Bernard of Clairvaux: The Three Kisses
  1. Kiss of his feet: mercy & Justice
  2. Kiss of his hands: generosity & fortitude
  3. Kiss of the mouth: intimacy of a lover

**Sirach / Ecclesiasticus** (pertaining to the Church): List of moral maxims supporting the divine law.

**Ecclesiastes** (assembly): Declares that all is vanity except “fear of the Lord” and keeping the commandments.

**Wisdom:** Discusses justice, immortality, the after-life, and remain faithful to God amid oppression.

#### D. New Testament

1. There was a gradual recognition by the Church that the 27 books of the New Testament should be accepted as divinely inspired on a par with the Old Testament.
2. However, an authoritative determination was not made by the Church until the late fourth century:
  - 382 A.D. - By Pope Damasus I
  - 383 A.D. - Council of Hippo

397 & 419 A.D. - Council of Carthage

787 A.D. - Second Council of Nicea

1441 A.D. - Council of Florence

1546 A.D. - Council of Trent

3. The content of the Bible was determined by the Catholic Church by the end of the fourth century.
  4. Even Martin Luther acknowledged that the Catholic Church decided which books belong in the bible: "We are obliged to yield many things to the Papists - that with them is the word of God, which we received from them; otherwise, we should have known nothing at all about it."<sup>13</sup>
- E. The Problem – Many Protestants today reject the Church’s divine authority to determine the inspired books that belong in the Bible.
1. This position undercuts the certainty of what books are divinely inspired and should be included in the Bible.
  2. Thus, scholars like R. C. Sproul and others claim: "The Bible is a *fallible* collection of infallible books."<sup>14</sup>
  3. These scholars are at a loss to explain the divine authority Protestants base their decision to reject books that belong in the Bible: 1 & 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom, Baruch and some parts of Esther and Daniel. Thus, Protestant Old Testaments are 7 books short.
- F. The 27 Books of the New Testament

**Gospels (4)** Focus is on Jesus’ life, deeds and teaching.

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

**Acts of the Apostles** Provides a history of the Church from Jesus’ Ascension to Paul preaching in Rome. The first part focuses primarily on Peter’s ministry; the second part on Paul ministry.

**Paul’s Letters (14)** are directed to pastoral issues effecting specific Churches. His theology is not set forth in a single treatment. He is the greatest theologian of

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<sup>13</sup> *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 24: "Commentary on the Gospel of John, Discussion on the 16<sup>th</sup> Chapter," p. 321.

<sup>14</sup> Sproul, Godfrey, White, Armstrong, MacArthur, Ferguson, Beeke, and Lanning, and Kistler, *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* (emphasis mine). p. 66.

the early Christianity, and his teaching has enormous influence on Christian thinking ever sense.

Romans  
1 & 2 Corinthians  
Galatians  
Ephesians  
Philippians  
Colossians  
1 & 2 Thessalonians  
1 & 2 Timothy  
Titus  
Philemon  
Hebrews

**Catholic Letters (7)** They are so called because they are not directed to any particular church, but to the Church in general.

James  
1 & 2 Peter  
1, 2, 3 John  
Jude

**Book of Revelation - Apocalypse** This literary masterpiece uses highly symbolic language to show how God directs the destiny of men and nations, as it anticipates the great event of Jesus' triumphant second coming.

The book ends with a depiction of paradise, the heavenly Jerusalem: "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev 21:22-23).

## VI. Conclusion

### A. Importance

The Bible is the Holy Spirit's whisper of love communicated to men in writing. Sacred Scripture gives an exciting freshness to the study of the Catholic faith, because it makes that faith come alive, like the human soul animates the body. When we study the truths of faith without its biblical foundation, we study a corpse. For this reason, the Church teaches that "the study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 24.

Thus, the Church makes the words of St. Jerome its own: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”<sup>16</sup> When we study the word of God, the Bible, we encounter the Divine Word who is God.

B. How to Study:

When we study the Bible prayfully with an open heart, the love of the Holy Spirit leaps from the sacred page and enflames our hearts. Therefore, we should begin the study of Scripture by asking the Holy Spirit to guide us.

C. Inerrancy

The Bible is inerrant. The Catholic Church affirms “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”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Church proclaims that it “has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord.”<sup>18</sup>

D. Interpretative Guide

Because the Bible does not interpret itself, the infallible teaching authority Christ gave his Church provides Christians with a sure guide in studying the Scriptures. Thus, St. Paul taught: “The Church of the living God is the pillar and bulwark [foundation] of truth” (1 Tim 3:15). As a result of this infallible guide, everything the Catholic Church teaches today is fully in agreement with what it has taught for the past twenty-one centuries.

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<sup>16</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 21.