

# Sacred Tradition

*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 Thessalonians 2:15*

**T**HE CHURCH TEACHES that the Word of God is handed on to us both orally and in writing. Sacred Tradition is the oral transmission of his Word, and Sacred Scripture is his written Word. Both are to be accepted with equal devotion and respect.

When Jesus left the earth after his Resurrection, he did not leave the Bible in the hands of his apostles; instead he gave them a mandate to go and teach all nations all that he had commanded (see Mt 28:20). What he had commanded was the fullness of Revelation that he came to reveal. The term apostolic Tradition refers to all that the apostles received from Jesus and learned from his example, or learned at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and then handed on by their own preaching, example and by the institutions they established.

The early Church guarded this apostolic teaching and passed it down to the next generation. St. Paul admonishes Timothy to carefully guard it and rebukes the Galatians for “so quickly deserting him [that is, Paul] who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel” (Gal 1:6). The apostles’ preaching, including Paul’s, was faithful to Christ and his Gospel. In order that their preaching or Tradition would be preserved, the apostles set aside other men to succeed them as bishops, giving to them the same authority and mandate they had received from Christ.

Eventually, much of this Apostolic Tradition was written down, thereby giving us the New Testament. The sacred writers of the New Testament were inspired to preserve not only what Jesus taught and did but also the early Church’s lived experience and interpretation of his Word. Sacred Tradition, then, came before the New Testament. This is noteworthy because it illustrates that God’s plan for trans-

mitting his Word would include not only the Bible but also Tradition.

The New Testament, while being the primary source for all that God revealed in Christ, is itself a product of Tradition. Tradition is a living and active process which the Church experiences from one age to the next while meditating on the Word of God and the events of salvation history. The Holy Spirit guides the Church in this process and guarantees that Tradition will be an authentic expression of God’s Word for each generation.

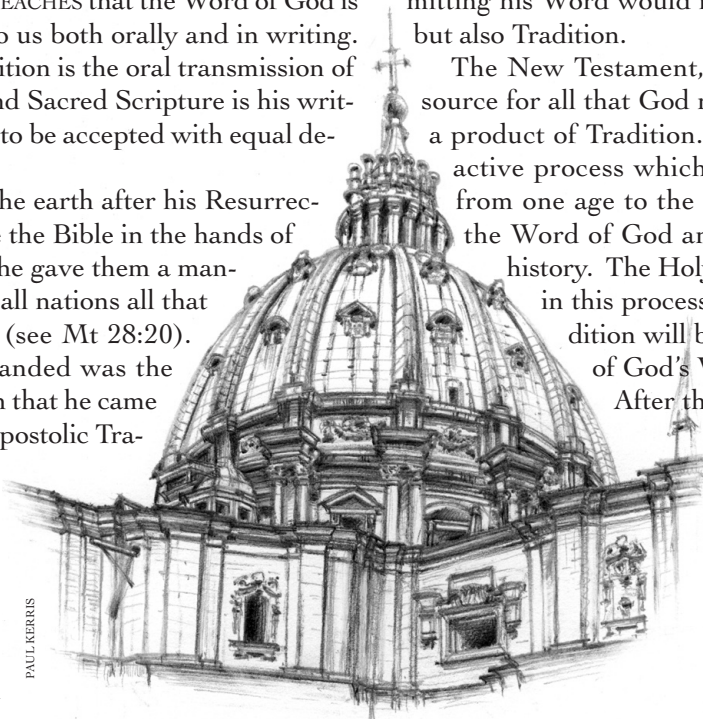
After the writing of the New Testament, subsequent generations could reflect not only on Jesus’ teaching but also on that privileged experience of first-generation Christians who knew Jesus when he walked the earth.

The Church in each generation, through prayer, study, and contemplation, reflects on

God’s Word in Scripture and gives new interpretation to it while never altering the Revelation it contains. In every generation, she expresses anew the Word of God against an ever-changing landscape of human society and culture. The diversity of devotions and styles of worship is beautiful and expresses the Church’s catholicity or universality. But these various local traditions are not what we mean when we speak of Tradition. As times change and in light of Tradition, these religious customs and practices may be changed or discarded. Sacred Tradition does not change. It is expressed differently from one age to the next but is always consistent with the truth of God’s Revelation.

## Excerpts from Sacred Tradition

It might be helpful to illustrate how Tradition has helped to shape the Church’s teachings and institutions. St. Ignatius of Antioch lived in the first



*The Dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome*

*“Sacred Tradition came before the New Testament.”*

century and probably met St. John the Apostle. Ignatius died a martyr in Rome around the turn of the first century and wrote seven letters that are still with us today. In them, he gives us a very strong expression of one's duty to obey the bishop and the priests (whom he calls presbyters). He writes, "[R]espect the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God and the college of apostles" (*Letter to the Trallians*). Already from the first century, the sacrament of Holy Orders is seen as having very definite levels, and St. Ignatius understands (as we do today) that the bishop is the shepherd who deserves our respect and obedience.

During his day, he also battled the heresy of Docetism that above all denied the humanity of Jesus Christ and thus refused to believe the Eucharist is Christ's real body and blood. St. Ignatius writes, "[The Docetists] abstain from the Eucharist ... because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his goodness raised up again" (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans*).

Another example from Tradition comes from the writings of St. Irenaeus. He was a bishop in Lyons, France from the years 177 to 202 AD. He writes about the importance of unity of doctrine throughout the whole Church. He also gives us one of our earliest expressions of what later will be called the "Apostles' Creed":

"For the Church, although dispersed throughout the world ..., has received from the apostles and from their disciples the faith in one God, Father Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them; and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who announced through the prophets the dispensations and the comings, and the birth from a Virgin, and the Passion, and the Resurrection from the dead, and the Ascension into Heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus our Lord, and his coming from Heaven in the glory of the Father to re-establish all things; and he raising up again of all flesh of all humanity" (*Against Heresies*).

This Creed is not only a summation of what we believe but also "the Rule of Faith" as called by St. Augustine, who was another early bishop of the Church from North Africa. He was bishop in Hippo for nearly 35 years (AD 395-430). He teaches us that the doctrines contained in the Creed are scattered throughout the Bible. They are brought to-

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DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

*A sister of the Daughters of St. Paul (FSP), founded in 1915, in Alba, Italy; an order dedicated to evangelizing the world with the full message of Christ through all the modern means of social communication*

gether in this simple formula to make it easier for even the most uneducated minds to memorize and so adhere to the saving truths revealed in Christ.

Tradition aids the Church in understanding and developing its institutions like the priesthood, its sacraments like the Eucharist, and its creeds like the Apostles' Creed by authentically living out and expressing the Word of God.

Quite simply, Tradition could be defined as the living interpretation of Scripture. In fact, as the Church prays and reflects on God's Word, answers

to some of the thorniest problems in the Bible come to light. For example, when asked about the day of his Second Coming, Jesus responds, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in Heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13:32). How can Jesus not know the day of his coming if he is the second person of the Trinity who shares in the all-knowing power of God? This is a very honest question, and one's answer could easily lead to error concerning the person of Jesus Christ. St. Gregory Nazianzen, a fourth-century theologian from the East,

commented on this passage: “[I]s it not perfectly plain to everyone that he does know as God, but says that, as man, he knows not?” (*Fifth Theological Oration*). While his human nature did not of its essence have knowledge of future events, the Lord’s soul, by reason of its union with God [did have such knowledge].” This quote has been preserved in Tradition and helps us understand this Scriptural passage. Jesus by virtue of his divine union with the Father enjoyed the full and complete knowledge of the plan of salvation he had been sent to reveal. The knowledge he had from his human nature was limited. He admits to not knowing the day of his coming because he had not been sent to reveal it (see Acts 1:7).

### What About *Sola Scriptura*?

The teaching that the Bible is the one and only source and authority for God’s Revelation is called *sola scriptura*, which is Latin for “Scripture alone.” Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers broke from the Church, and so proposed this doctrine that cut off the Bible from both the authority and living Tradition of the Church. Most who believe it simply take it for granted that it is true and never ask the question: Where in the Bible do we find this teaching? After all, if Scripture is our only source, then it must be in there.

The first problem is that *sola scriptura* simply is not found in the Bible. We do not find it among the teachings of Moses in the Old Testament or in the teachings of Jesus nor in that of his apostles found in the New Testament. Defenders of *sola scriptura* usually turn to 2 Tm 3:16-17: “*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.*” They claim that Paul here is showing that the Bible alone is sufficient to make a man or woman a complete and upright Christian. Because Paul does not mention Tradition or Church authority as things necessary to equip us to carry out a Christian life, it is asserted that Paul thereby proves *sola scriptura*.

***“If the Bible alone was all we needed, then we would expect Jesus to have written it.”***

This line of reasoning does violence to both the meaning and context of this passage and runs contrary to what we find elsewhere in Paul’s letters. Paul does not say “Scripture alone” but simply says “*Scripture ... is profitable for training in righteousness,*” leaving the door wide open that other things could be useful and necessary for our sanctification. Also, this interpretation runs completely against what Paul is saying just two verses previous: “[A]s for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed” (2 Tm 3:14). Paul is exhorting Timothy to hold fast to the oral teaching and preaching which Paul had given him. At the end of his First Letter to Timothy, Paul exhorts him to diligently guard what has been entrusted to him (see 1 Tm 6:20). This is another refer-

ence to the importance of the oral Tradition that Paul had handed over to Timothy (see also 2 Tm 2:2; 1 Cor 11:2).

A second problem is the witness and example of Jesus.

If the Bible alone was all we needed, then we would expect Jesus to have written it. But he did not; instead he instituted the Church (see Mt 16:18) and left it with the authority to interpret and to teach everything that he had taught (see Mt 28:20). He also told his disciples, when he sent them out to preach in his name, “*He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me*” (Lk 10:16).

Finally, in principle, *sola scriptura* is illogical because it must affirm the Church’s Tradition and authority at least up through the fourth century when the canon of the New Testament was decided. The Bible does not come with an “inspired table of contents.” The only way we know which books be-

long there and which ones do not is by the authority of the Church. The Church, beginning with the Council of Carthage (397 AD), drew up the first list or canon of inspired books for the New Testament. Accepting this canon means not accepting *sola scriptura*, because accepting the decision of a Church council is the equivalent of accepting the Church’s authority and Sacred Tradition.

(CCC 78-84, 2651)



*St. Catherine of Alexandria, by Carlo Dolci, 1616-1686*