



DIVINE REVELATION

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“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...”

- Heb. 1:1

What is Divine Revelation?

Divine Revelation means that certain truths of our faith come not as a result of human reason or study, but have been revealed to us supernaturally by God. Without God telling us these truths, we would not have known them. The truths of revelation go beyond reason, but do not contradict it. They are logical according to the dictates of reason, but not provable by the powers of reason alone. For this reason, God has chosen to give this knowledge directly to us.

“By natural reason man can know God with certainty, on the basis of His works. But there is another order of knowledge, which man cannot possibly arrive at by his own powers: the order of divine Revelation. Through an utterly free decision, God has revealed Himself and given Himself to man. This He does by revealing the mystery, his plan of loving goodness, formed from all eternity in Christ, for the benefit of all men. God has fully revealed this plan by sending us His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.”

-CCC 50

St. Thomas Aquinas says:

“It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason... But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.” (*STh, I, 1*)

To summarize St. Thomas’ teaching, the three reasons why it was necessary for God to communicate Himself to men are:

- 1) Since man is ordered towards God, it is fitting that God should reach out to communicate with man in a way man can understand

- 2) Since man's reason is imperfect, it is fitting that God's truth should be told to mankind by God Himself so that we can understand it as He means us to, free from error.
- 3) Even regarding those things we could know about God with certainty from reason alone, it takes such depth of thought and time to arrive at these conclusions that few would have time or perseverance to do so. Therefore, it is helpful for God to take the initiative and communicate to us.

Scripture & Tradition

Divine Revelation comes to us in two distinct modes of transmission: through the writings of the Holy Scriptures and through the Tradition of the Church. These two together form one body of revelation, the "deposit of faith," and have one common source, "For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal" (CCC 80).

The person of Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God, in whom God has said everything. Christ, the Son of God, is the Father's one, perfect and unsurpassable Word.

"In giving us his Son, his only Word...he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word-and he has no more to say...because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son."

-St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 22, 3-5

No further Revelation

The Christian economy is the new and definitive Covenant, which will never pass away. Apostolic Tradition teaches that Divine Revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle and that, consequently, no new public revelation is expected until the Second Coming of Christ. Nevertheless, it still remains for the Church to gradually grasp the full significance of Revelation as it is pondered over the centuries.

The Catechism contrasts public revelation with *private revelation*: "Throughout the ages, there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history...Christian faith cannot accept "revelations" that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects [i.e., Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, as well as Muslims] which base themselves on such "revelations" (CCC 67-68).

The Church: The Authentic Interpreter of Revelation

It belongs to the authority of the teaching office of the Church, the Magisterium, to define how Revelation will be interpreted. Though individuals are encouraged to study and internalize the teachings and doctrines of Revelation, any conclusions drawn from such private study that

contradict the understanding of the Church on the interpretation of Revelation are *ipso facto* incorrect. It belongs to the Magisterium and to the Magisterium alone to interpret Revelation.

“The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”

-CCC 85

Sacred Scripture

“In order to reveal himself to men, in the condescension of his goodness God speaks to them in human words: “Indeed, the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.”

-CCC 101

Everyone is familiar with what the Bible (the Scriptures) is. But have we ever thought about what exactly we mean when we say the Bible is Sacred Scripture; that is, *inspired*?¹ Catholic teaching affirms several propositions about the Scriptures:

- ❖ God is the primary author of Sacred Scripture
- ❖ The books of the Bible are accepted as sacred and canonical whole and entire with all their parts.
- ❖ God truly inspired the human authors of the sacred books, choosing them and making full use of their natural faculties, powers and manners of speech.
- ❖ God had them consign to writing only what he wanted written, and no more.
- ❖ The inspired books teach the truth. “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 11*)
- ❖ The Scriptures can only be rightly understood when read in the living tradition of the Church and when illumined by the Holy Spirit.

“For the sake of our salvation”

The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, in chapter 11 says that “the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the

¹ “Inspiration,” from the Latin *in spiratio*, means “breathed in.” This is what we mean when we say the Scriptures are “God-breathed.”

sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures.” The passage is notably ambiguous and can be interpreted in two ways:

- A. The Bible is immune from error in everything it says, and everything it says God wanted there for the sake of our salvation.
- B. The Bible is immune from error only insofar as it teaches about matters pertaining directly to salvation, but can err when it treats of other topics.

The proper interpretation is interpretation A, which is supported by numerous declarations of the Popes throughout Church history, especially *Lamentabili Sane* of Pope St. Pius X, *Spiritu Paraclitus* of Benedict XV, and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Humani Generis* of Pope Pius XII. The second opinion, interpretation B, is heresy (see addendum for Class 3).

Criteria for Reading and Understanding Scripture

Since Scripture is inspired by God, we must be careful and respectful in approaching it. It cannot be looked at as just another book. In order to get a correct understanding of Scripture, we must read interpret it in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written. For this reason, the Church proposes three criteria that we keep in mind when reading Scripture:

- 1) Be attentive to the content & unity of the whole Scripture
- 2) Read Scripture within the living tradition of the Church
- 3) Be attentive to the analogy of faith (the coherence of truths)

Catholic Tradition likewise distinguishes four modes or “sense” in which we can interpret Scripture.

- **Literal:** the literal meaning of the text. All other senses must flow from this one.
- **Allegorical:** the sign value of the text as it prefigures or symbolizes a mystery of the faith
- **Moral:** the events of Scripture provide us with examples of how and how not to live
- **Anagogical:** the events interpreted in terms of their eternal significance

For example, take the well-known story of David and Goliath. Looking at it according to the four senses, we can discern several levels of meaning:

Literal: Around 1000 B.C., an Israelite boy David killed a large Philistine warrior named Goliath.

Allegorical: Just as David appeared weak yet slew the giant, so our Savior, though appearing weak in the flesh, conquered and destroyed the works of the devil.

Moral: The story of David and Goliath teaches us that, with God's help, even the weak can stand up and overcome any obstacle.

Anagogical: David's victory over Goliath prefigures the final victory of Christ over the devil at the end of time.

Another example of this method of interpretation as used in the Fathers of the Church comes from the writing of St. John Cassian (c. 360-435). Here, St. John discusses the four senses in which Jerusalem can be taken in the Bible: Conferences, chapter 8:

"Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically as the city of the Jews; allegorically as Church of Christ, anagogically as the heavenly city of God 'which is the mother of us all,' tropologically, as the soul of man, which is frequently subject to praise or blame from the Lord under this title" (Conferences, Chap. 8).

The Canon of Scripture

"It was by apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of sacred books. The complete list is called the canon of Scripture. It includes 46 books for the Old Testament and 27 for the New."

-CCC 120

The canon includes:

The Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi.

The New Testament: the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Letters of St. Paul to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, the Letter to the Hebrews, the Letters of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, and Revelation (the Apocalypse).

In the early days of the Church, many books were circulating around the local churches and, while most books were commonly agreed upon, some (such as II Peter, the Apocalypse, Hebrews), were debated. The Church finally developed a fixed canon in the Council of Laodicea in 360, by the decrees of Pope Damasus (366-384), at the Council of Rome in 382, and the important Councils of Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397. The canon was reaffirmed again at the Council of Florence in 1441 and infallibly defined by the Council of Trent in 1556.

Why are Catholic Bibles bigger?

During the Reformation era, most Reformers rejected seven books of the Old Testament for two main reasons:

- (1) Several of the books, like Wisdom and II Maccabees, contradicted Protestant doctrines
- (2) Several of the excluded books did not appear in certain ancient Jewish canons.

The books excluded by Protestants are the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), I and II Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, and Baruch. The Catholic Church has always accepted these books and rejects the Reformers arguments against their validity. For an excellent treatment of this issue, see *Why Catholic Bibles are Bigger*, by Gary G. Michuta.

Content of Sacred Scripture

Many learned persons spend their entire lives in the study of Scripture, and so it is not possible to give an even remotely thorough treatment of the Bible's content here. A brief overview is possible, however.

The Old Testament chronicles the Creation of the Universe and of man, in his original state of blessedness and his subsequent fall from grace. The growth and diffusion of the human race is treated in Genesis 4-11, until we come to the call of Abraham, father of the Hebrew race. The Old Testament goes on to tell of God's dealings with and promises to the patriarchs, the bondage of their descendants in Egypt and subsequent deliverance under Moses, who leads them to the wilderness where God delivers His law to mankind through the children of Israel. Next, the Scriptures relate the possession of the Promised Land by the Israelites and the establishment of their kingdom under David, followed by the erection of the Temple of Jerusalem by Solomon. The Old Testament goes on to tell of the successes and failures of the Jewish kingdoms and their final deportation and slavery to Babylon (c. 587 B.C.). Besides this history, the Bible recalls the writings of the prophets and their collected wisdom. The Old Testament ends with the story of the Maccabee brothers (c. 163 B.C.) and their struggle to rid Israel of the corrupt Greek paganism of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

The New Testament gospels tell of the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and are called "the heart of the Scriptures" by the Catechism because "they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior" (CCC 125). The Acts relate the deeds of the Apostles in the generation following the ascension of Christ while the letters of Paul and the Apostles are doctrinal and moral treatises. The New Testament ends with the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse), an apocalyptic vision whose complex imagery and cryptic meaning has astounded scholars for centuries.

Despite having two Testaments, Christians must firmly acknowledge and understand that the two are not contradictory to each other, but form a beautiful unity. As St. Augustine said, "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New."

“The Church ‘forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’”

-CCC 133

Sacred Tradition

“But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

-John 21:25

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either in word of mouth or by our letter.”

-II Thess. 2:15

Sacred Tradition consists in the unwritten or oral tradition handed on by the Apostles. Tradition has its source in the teachings and words of Jesus, as well as what they themselves received by the Holy Spirit. Only a fragment of the Apostle’s teaching was ever committed to writing, and Sacred Tradition preserves the elements of Revelation that the Apostles passed on in their preaching, teaching and example.

This Sacred Tradition must also be distinguished “from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified, or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church’s Magisterium” (CCC 83).

Sacred Tradition helps us to interpret Sacred Scripture accurately, as is stated in CCC 113. Why do we need this guidance? Because, as St. Peter says in II Pet. 3:16, many things in the Scriptures are difficult to understand and liable to be twisted by the unlearned, often “to their own destruction.”

Take, for example, the question of the Trinitarian formula of baptism. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells His disciples to baptize “in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” However, Acts 2:38, 8:16 and 10:48, while not giving a baptism formula, seem to imply that baptisms were done “in the Name of Jesus Christ.” How is one to decide from Scripture alone which is the proper formula? This question has in fact caused schism and dissention in Protestant denominations.

As Catholics, however, we can look to Sacred Tradition for the answer. Tradition teaches us (1) The Church has always taught baptism “in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” from time immemorial, (2) the earliest writings, like the *Didache*, specify baptism must be done in the Trinitarian formula, (3) we never find any Father of the Church advocating any other formula other than the Trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19. Therefore, Tradition tells us that the right way to interpret the Scripture is by using the formula Christ gave in Matt. 28:19. The other

passages refer not to a baptismal formula, but to baptism in general (i.e., being baptized “into Christ”, as St. Paul teaches in Gal. 3:27).

The Magisterium- The Living, Teaching Office of the Church

“...I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (I. Tim. 3:14-15).

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Divine Revelation falls to the living teaching office of the Church (the Magisterium).² Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ and as such does not depend on the interpretations of theologians, the will of the people or even the opinions of any particular bishops. The Magisterium is defined as the body of bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome.

The Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. Nevertheless, the Magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it proclaims dogmas (see CCC 88-90).

Conclusion

“It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”

-CCC 95

For Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §51-133; *Why Catholic Bibles Are Bigger*, Gary G. Michuta; *Tradition and the Church*, Msgr. George Agius, D.D., J.C.D.; St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh I,1*; St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*; *Lamentabili Sane* of Pope St. Pius X, *Spiritu Paraclitus* of Benedict XV, and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Humani Generis* of Pope Pius XII; Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*; Hebrews 1; canons of the Councils of Rome (383), Hippo (393) and Carthage (397); see also the *Roman Catechism* of the Council of Trent (Session IV, 1546).

² From the Latin word *magister*, “teacher.”