

The Role of Tradition

Most of our separated brethren believe that all that is needed for faith is conveyed in the Bible. This is the principle of *sola scriptura* (only scripture) while the Catholic teaching is "Scripture and Tradition." What does Tradition encompass?

Paul teaches us that we are to hold to what is given us by Scripture and what is conveyed orally (1 Cor 11:23). This oral teaching is Tradition. The Catholic faith makes a distinction between Traditions (capital T) which are based on the teaching of apostolic times and thus can not be changed and those traditions (small t) which can be changed by the church.

Examples of Traditions are: prayers for the dead, the perpetual virginity of Mary, the celebration of Sunday as the Lords' day, and the Blessed Trinity. Many of these Traditions are summed up in the early creeds such as the Apostles Creed. The (capital T) Traditions are also referred to by the Church as "Sacred Tradition."

The other (small t) traditions are such practices as: priestly celibacy, specified days of fasting and/or abstinence, and kneeling and standing in Church. As time goes on, these traditions may be changed or revised as necessary for the Church to respond to God through the language, culture, problems and opportunities of our day.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was sometimes dragged into arguments between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The main difference between these two groups was that the Sadducees restricted their beliefs and rules to what was explicitly written in the Torah while the Pharisees included the wisdom of the ages (Tradition). When Jesus was involved in the disagreement, he sided with the Pharisees. As an example, in Matthew 22:23-33 he supports the Pharisees' Traditional teaching of the resurrection of the dead. What does all of this mean to us? Even after the oral teachings were committed to written form, scripture was not considered to be the sole source of God's word and revelation. The period of oral preaching and Tradition did not go on forever; the preaching carried on but some of the teaching of Christ was written down, partly, at any rate to provide a reliable record of what had happened.

Consider Galatians 1:6-7: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel--not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." Here, "gospel" cannot mean the written word of scripture, but the total message of redemption in Christ. The major drawback of the reformation was that the reformers narrowed down the sense of the word "gospel" from that of the message (Gospel) of Christ to that of the written word. As Saint John notes at the end of his gospel: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (John 21:25) The four gospels are a sign, not the equivalent, of the Gospel of Christ. The living Tradition is wider in scope than the Scripture alone. This Tradition preserves some truths of revelation which are not found in Scripture and also deepens and clarifies the meaning of Scripture. Scripture and Tradition form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church.

The Bible cannot interpret itself and we are warned about the dangers of trying to interpret it without the help of the Church. "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." (2 Peter 1:20) And also: "So, Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'" (Acts 8:30-31).

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