

## Knowing and Living God's Word

**H**ow do you respond when you notice a clean-cut representative of another religious body, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, approaching your front door? Are you confident that you will be able to explain your faith and its biblical basis in a simple and convincing way? Sadly, many Catholics are unable to do so because they don't understand how their Catholic faith is rooted in God's word as it comes to us in sacred Scripture and Tradition and through the teaching office of the church.

A colleague of mine who became a Catholic after years as a convinced Presbyterian pastor said that he was stunned to discover, when he began to investigate the Catholic faith, that Catholics actually revere the Bible as the Word of God. Further, he was surprised to discover that Catholics draw their basic beliefs, including beliefs about Tradition and the church's magisterium, from the Bible.

To me it is ironic that while informed Catholics are ready to point out that the Bible is "our book," the "book of the church," relatively few Catholics read and study the Bible regularly. Relatively few know as well as many other Christians do what "our book" teaches. Hence, the challenge to Catholics today in this area is twofold.

First, we must *know the Word of God* so that we will "always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you...with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15). Second, Catholics must *live the Word of God*. Our salvation depends on being "doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving [ourselves]" (James 1:22). These two challenges, of course, are related

because we cannot live God's word unless we understand it and know what it really means.

The Second Vatican Council addresses the questions of what God's Word is and how it comes to us. The Council invites us to put the Word into practice in our daily lives. It is not surprising then that one of the four primary documents of Vatican II, called "constitutions," is the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. The Latin title is simply *Dei Verbum* (often indicated by *DV* in citations): "The Word of God." Let's examine what this document has to say as it addresses some important questions often asked about God's revelation.

### **Why do we need God's Word?**

This document stresses that the main purpose of God's revelation is not to deliver commands from on high, nor is it to provide important information about God or about the universe. God has chosen to reveal himself to the human race in order to invite us into a personal relationship of friendship and fellowship with himself (see *Dei Verbum*, 2).

What a tremendous offer! Out of God's pure, unmerited love, he desires to share his life with us and to make us his friends and even members of his family. God reveals himself that we might accept his invitation to life, thus becoming daughters and sons of God and brothers and sisters of the Son of God who became man, Jesus Christ.

We can come to know of God's existence indirectly through nature or creation. But through the sacred Scriptures we can come to know God "with ease, with solid certitude, and with no trace of error" (no. 6).

What God reveals about himself is life-giving and life-changing. The Old Testament teaches that "man does not live by bread alone, but...by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD"

(Deuteronomy 8:3). The New Testament records Jesus' teaching: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). Jesus promises his followers, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). In God's Word we find truth, freedom and life. Why settle for anything less?

### **Is there any new revelation?**

Jesus Christ, who is God's eternal Word made flesh, is the final and fullest revelation to humanity of God's own nature and identity. In Jesus, God has made with us a "new and definitive covenant, [which] will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation [the Second Coming] of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tim. 6:14 and Tit. 2:13)" (*Dei Verbum*, 4).

Jesus is the climax of God's revelation of himself—because he is the very image of the Father (see Colossians 1:15), in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. This is why Catholics cannot accept non-Christian religions as revelations of God equal to that found in Christ. Catholics reject the additions by Mormons, the New Age movement and others that clearly have no root or basis in the public revelation of Christ in the first century. The Catholic Church, along with many other Christian traditions, believes that this privileged period of public revelation ended with the death of the last apostle of Jesus.

### **What is our response to God's revelation?**

God has totally given himself and revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. The only fitting response on our part is to believe fully in his revelation and to give ourselves totally to God. As *Dei Verbum* states: "The obedience of faith' (Rom. 16:26; cf. 1:5; 2 Cor. 10:5-6) must be

given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God...freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him” (no. 5).

As Jesus promised, when we come to believe in him, we “will know the truth, and the truth will make [us] free” (John 8:32). In obedience to God, we discover true freedom.

### **How does the Bible come to us?**

God revealed himself to the ancient Hebrew people and later came among us in fullness in Jesus Christ. It is reasonable to ask how we can know with certainty what actually happened thousands of years ago.

Catholics believe that all the books in the Old and New Testaments were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and hence have God as their author. The writers of the sacred Scripture, though, are also true authors of the Bible. God used their human talents and abilities, along with their limited cultural backgrounds, to communicate the truths he wanted written down (*Dei Verbum*, 11). The Bible is truly “the Word of God in human words.”

We have this unique set of writings, preserved two thousand to three thousand years after their composition, because they have been safeguarded and handed on to us by the Hebrew people of the old covenant and by the church of the new covenant. We can outline the steps by which the New Testament has come down to us (see *Dei Verbum*, 7, 8).

1. Christ commissioned the apostles to preach to all people. They faithfully handed on, by word of mouth and example, all that they had received from Christ or through the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

2. The apostles and those who worked with them wrote down this revelation, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Letters of the apostles and various Gospels, which are orderly collections of the oral and written teaching about Jesus (see Luke 1), were circulated among the local communities of the early church.
3. The apostles left bishops as their successors. The apostles were “handing over their own teaching role to the bishops,” as Saint Irenaeus explained in the second century, so that the truth would be preserved until the end of time.
4. The bishops of the early church developed official lists (“canons”) of inspired writings. They believed these writings expressed God’s revelation most fully and faithfully. Although slightly different canons emerged in the early church, by the Middle Ages a consensus had been reached that the forty-six writings of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven writings of New Testament that comprise the present “Catholic Bible” were all inspired by the Holy Spirit and are God’s revelation for all time.

### **Is the Bible alone God’s Word?**

The Bible is God’s Word, but Catholics do not believe that God’s revelation is limited to the Bible. What was it that the apostles handed on to the churches they founded? The heritage of the apostles includes not only those things that eventually were written down in the sacred Scripture but “everything which contributes to the holiness of life, and the increase in faith of the People of God.” From the example of the apostles, the Second Vatican Council concludes, “the Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and hands on

to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum*, 8).

Catholics believe that God desires to hand on to us not only an inspired *written* Word but a whole way of life and worship that includes all that the church is and believes. This includes, for example, how Christians are to worship God communally and beliefs about morality, especially moral issues not directly spoken of in Scripture.

These truths "handed on" within the church are known as "sacred Tradition." The word *tradition* simply means "something that has been passed on or handed on." The capital *T* in "sacred Tradition" designates those traditions in the church that are an essential part of God's revelation. They are not liable to change over time. Many other "traditions" in the church may change and often reflect a particular culture, time or circumstance.

For example, sacred Tradition includes such things as the basic form of the eucharistic liturgy, which dates back to the primitive church, and the teaching authority of ecumenical or worldwide councils of the church's leaders. In the moral sphere it includes the condemnation of abortion, infanticide and homosexual practices. For centuries Christians have upheld these matters and others like them, so Catholics consider them part of God's inspired and unchangeable word to his church. God has not only given his church a written Word but a way of life that needs to be presented, taught and handed on. This is sacred Tradition.

Traditions (with a small *t*) that are liable to change include particular regulations for fasting and abstinence, the language and other outward forms of the liturgy, the wearing of veils or other conventions of dress that are often determined by the culture. These traditions are good and often necessary for a particular place and time but not for all places and times. Celibacy is a requirement, for example, for priesthood in the Latin Rite Catholic Church but not for all priests in Catholic churches of the Eastern rite. Thus it is an honored Catholic practice and tradition, though not part of sacred Tradition.

## **What is the relationship between Scripture and Tradition?**

*Dei Verbum* explains that the word of God is made up of both sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition and that there is a close connection and communication between the two:

For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit. To the successors of the apostles, sacred Tradition hands on in its full purity God's word, which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit... Consequently, it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence. (no. 9)

## **Is sacred Tradition unchanging?**

Sacred Tradition is not static and unchanging, like the canon of Scripture. Sacred Tradition develops through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is constantly leading the church into a fuller and deeper understanding of the truth.

The church grows in its understanding as its members study and pray over the truths handed down and seek to live them faithfully. There is also a deepening understanding of these truths through the preaching and teaching of the church's leaders, particularly the bishops "who have received...the sure gift of truth" (*Dei Verbum*, 8). Indeed, the Council assures us that the church is constantly moving forward to a fuller grasp of divine truth until the Lord brings history to a close.

One example of deeper insights into God's truth discovered over the centuries concerns the *dignity of the human person*. The

development of Christian teaching and social action regarding human rights is expressed in the church's stand against slavery. In the area of *religious freedom*, the church teaches against coercion in religious matters, including bigoted religious intolerance and wars of religion. This is why Catholics strongly oppose racial discrimination and are seeking an end to religious wars such as the prolonged conflicts in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East.

### **Who decides the authentic meaning of Scripture and Tradition?**

While biblical scholars, historians and other experts can provide important insights into the meaning of God's word, Catholics believe that God has given the charism (gift) and office of interpreting the authentic meaning of God's revelation to the successors of the apostles—the bishops in union with the successor of Peter, the pope. These are the official teachers or magisterium of the Catholic Church.

In the history of our church, the universal body of bishops has always made the crucial decisions about God's word. They first decided which ancient writings were truly God's revelation for all time: that is, they determined the "canon" of Scripture. They decided what Scripture actually meant, especially when disputes arose, as they met in councils seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And they have acted as the official teachers of the Christian faith in each age, as successors of Jesus' apostles.

*Dei Verbum* beautifully explains the role of the magisterium and the close relationship of sacred Scripture, sacred Tradition and the magisterium. One point made very clear is that the teaching office or magisterium of the Catholic Church "is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws

from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed” (no. 10).

Like a tripod, which cannot stand without each of its legs, the Word of God cannot come to Christians in its purity and completeness without these three channels of God’s truth: the Bible, sacred Tradition and the teaching authority of the living church.

### **Is the Bible free from all error?**

Why has God revealed himself to us? So that he may bring us into a relationship of love with himself, through which we are saved from our sin and brought to eternal salvation—life with God forever in heaven. Hence, Catholics believe in biblical inerrancy. We believe that the Bible—every word and line of it—is without error in revealing those truths that pertain to salvation. *Dei Verbum* states “that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (no. 11; also see no. 6).

In other words, sacred Scripture cannot err as it teaches us God’s truth, which he has revealed for the sake of our salvation. When the Bible speaks of God, the nature of human persons, God’s will for them, the relationship of God to humanity and how we are to relate to him and to each other, there can be no error.

### **What is the relationship between the Old and New Testaments?**

This relationship is well expressed in article 16 of *Dei Verbum*. In short, God’s design is that “the New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old is made manifest in the New.”