

# THE BIBLE: *God's Word*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 101-141)

## A. Inspiration

### 1. *Who wrote the Sacred Scriptures?*

Two extreme conclusions are possible.

1. Man alone: All sacred texts are man-made inventions, the product of wishful thinking. Man's attempt to justify his social laws by attributing them to God. This allows absolutely free interpretation. There is no content of doctrine.
2. God alone: Sacred texts are composed and written by God and either dictated to man (Islam - the Koran) or descend from heaven (Mormons - the Book of Mormon). This demands a literal and fundamentalist interpretation of the bible.

As Catholics, we hold a middle ground between these extremes: God was & continues to be the source of revelation. He reveals himself to us through the mediation of other human beings - the best example being Christ: God made man. Throughout history, from Adam, through Abraham, Moses, David, the Prophets and the anonymous people of Israel through to our own day, God has used human beings and human experiences to demonstrate to us who he is, what our deepest nature is as creatures made in his image, and how we should live in order for that nature to grow to its fullest stature. In looking back on their experience, the people of Israel could see not only the work of God in their own history, but also guidance from God in how to live their lives. For instance, the deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus) was seen as being part of the dynamic plan of God to save & raise up his chosen people - not just at that moment but also throughout history & from all forms of slavery.

- *God uses human beings to communicate His message of salvation to the world: "For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the Apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself." (Vatican II: Dei Verbum 11, Also C.C.C. 105)*
- *God inspired the human authors of the sacred books: "To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing*

*whatever he had wanted written, and no more".*" (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 11, C.C.C. 106)

The Holy Spirit, given to the whole Church at Pentecost, but given to individual prophets in the Old Testament, led the human authors of the Sacred Scriptures to record faithfully the message and teaching which God is revealing to mankind: *"I have said these things to you while I am still with you, but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you."* (Jn 14:25-6)

## **2. The Sacred Scriptures: The Word of God**

*"In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* (Jn. 1:1) The Word of God is not a series of printed words on a page. The Word is a person: Jesus Christ himself. We call the Sacred Scriptures "The Word of God" because we believe that God uses these words to communicate with His people. But more appropriately, we should call the Sacred Scriptures the words of God - because God has fully revealed himself once & for all in the life & teaching of Jesus Christ, his Word in the form of a person. This Word is still active and dynamic among his people because Christ is at work now in his Church - through the Sacred Scriptures, but also in other ways, notably in the sacraments and in the teachings of the Church.

- The Word of God is the way God reveals himself to us. This Word is a person, not a series of letters of the alphabet. The Sacred Scriptures are therefore only a part of the complete story of God's self-revelation in Christ which have been put to paper under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Word in its entirety is CHRIST, the eternal Word: the whole Word means the whole Christ - this means the Church (Christ's Body) through whom he continues to teach and through Sacred Tradition (that part of Revelation that was not put into writing in the Sacred Scriptures).
- The Sacred Scriptures are God's written Word. In addition there is God's spoken Word (in the teaching of the Church and in Sacred Tradition). These are both parts of God's SACRAMENTAL Word - the God/Man, Jesus Christ, the eternally begotten Son of the Father, most perfect expression of the Godhead.
- Christ, the Son of God, made man, is the Father's one, perfect & unsurpassable Word. In Him, he has said everything; there will be no other word than this. (C.C.C. 65) *"Christ is the image of the invisible god... for in him all things were created, in heaven & on earth, visible & invisible. All things were created through him & for him. He is before all things & in him all things hold together ... For in him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."* (Col 1:15-6, 19)

## **B. The New Testament: stages of writing**

### **1. Life & teaching of Jesus**

Christ himself wrote nothing, as far as we know. He taught and acted, encouraging his disciples to imitate his words and actions. This is the first "handing on" ('tradition') of the Gospel (*cf. Mk 6:7-13, Mt. 10:1-16, Lk. 9:1-6*). The apostles learned directly from Christ so as to pass on the teaching he gave them. Their recollection of Christ's teaching and words was guaranteed by Christ to be assisted by the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit so that nothing essential to his teaching should be forgotten or neglected.

- *"I have said these things while still with you; but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you." (Jn. 14:25-26)*

### **2. Oral Tradition**

*"Go, make disciples of all nations, ... teach them to observe all the commands I gave you" (Mt. 28:19-20)*. The Acts of the Apostles recounts how the apostles went out to preach in obedience to Christ's command: their preaching is almost exclusively oral. They spoke to converts, encouraged communities, and gave instruction in the basics of the faith by word of mouth. That this is the first transmission of the Gospel is recorded for us in the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St. Paul, which both refer to the apostles teaching wherever they went.

### **3. Written Texts**

When the Church entered times of crisis, and the spoken teaching was being abused or misunderstood, the apostles began to write, first to encourage communities from which they were separated (*cf. Paul's letters*), and later in an attempt to leave a permanent record of the heart of the faith. However, the writers agree that their written pieces were not exhaustive, and much of the content of the preached Word was not recorded in a written form: at the end of his Gospel, probably the last of the four, St. John writes *"There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written" (21:25)*. It was not St. John's intention to write down all that Christ said or did. Equally, we have no adequate reason for arguing that he only recorded the essential things (as if Christ's other words were not important, or only duplicates of his recorded sayings). There is as much evidence to suggest that he, and the other evangelists wrote down only what was needed for their day and community (St. Luke was writing for Gentile converts, St. Matthew for Jewish Christians (who were facing stiff and relentless opposition and then persecution from synagogue authorities from the very beginning - see the Acts of the Apostles, where the earliest communities were harried by Jewish authorities, not Roman ones, and driven underground by men like Saul who were commissioned by the Temple authorities in Jerusalem), St. John for his own community, St. Mark probably for the disciples gathered by St. Peter in Rome. For this reason, the Gospels reflect the needs and questions of the people they were written for. There is no reason to suppose that at any time until the late

fourteenth century it was ever seriously believed that the New Testament recorded all that was needed for the Church.

From the evidence of the Scriptures themselves we see that the written accounts of the teaching of Christ and the apostles were not only an incomplete compilation but also that the oral teaching and commands were not superseded once the written texts were prepared. Some people argue that from the time of Christ until the New Testament was written (i.e., from about 33 A.D. to about 70 A.D.), when there were no written texts for the Church, then the Christians were permitted to live according to the oral teaching of the apostles - BUT that once there were written Gospels and letters, then the Church was bound to follow these and nothing other. The oral teaching was to be forgotten and only the Scriptures were to be believed and followed. This does not hold water. St. Paul never gave his communities the idea that they could forget his preaching among them now that there were written accounts circulating (including his own letters). Quite the contrary - in the letters he wrote which are now within Scripture, he ORDERS his communities to remember all he taught them, no matter how he put the message across: "*stand firm, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*" (2 Thess 2:15). To St. Paul, the oral transmission of the Gospel was of no lower authority than the written - and the community in Thessalonika were not excused following his teaching merely because it was not recorded on paper. Indeed, he regards the oral transmission of the Gospel and the written transmission to be carrying equal authority - it is the one Gospel that matters, and the means of communication is of lesser importance. If anything, St. Paul regards the written form (letters etc) as less satisfactory than the oral form, because time and paper force letters to a certain brevity which is not the case in face-to-face meetings - preaching the Gospel is more adequately done when it is preached directly. Given all this, it is hard to see how it can be made out that the written form of the Gospel message has superior authority to the oral, or to find any indication that for St. Paul, the bench-mark of true Christian teaching was that which had been recorded on paper. In fact, for St. Paul, the only real litmus test for orthodoxy is not comparison with the written teachings (of himself or anyone else) but simple comparison with the message he preached - if it is the same message that St. Paul preached then it is authentic. If it varies from his presentation, then it is to be condemned, whether it be preached by an apostle or even an angel (*Gal. 1:6-10*). St. Paul sees the test of trustworthy teaching as being whether it matches up with what he preached - again, this is oral, not written. There is absolutely no indication within the Scriptures that once the written texts were drafted, then we should forget the oral preaching and its authority. If anything, the written letters are composed to remind the communities that to keep the true faith, they must adhere to the original proclamation of the Gospel - the oral teaching. The written Scriptures actually back up the authority of the spoken, oral teaching of the apostles: to St. Paul, the latter is the norm. See C.C.C. 74-79

### **C. By whose authority?**

As Catholics, we preach the authenticity of 46 books in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New. There was much division in the first four centuries as to which spiritual books should be incorporated in the canon of Sacred Scripture. Many texts were accepted almost universally (Gospels of Matthew, Mark & Luke, 1 Peter, 1 John), some texts were rejected in many communities (e.g., Gospel of John, Revelation,

Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John etc.) & other texts we reject were regarded as truly scriptural (e.g., the Gospels of Peter, Thomas & Matthias, the Acts of Peter, Paul, Andrew & John, the epistle of Barnabas, 1 & 2 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas etc.). It was not until c. 400 A.D. that the authority of the Church, in Council, settled the canon of Sacred Scripture. In other words, the Church, led by the Holy Spirit, has recognised the authenticity of these books. In order to trust what we read in Sacred Scripture as being the Word of God, we have to presume the authority of the Church to determine infallibly that the Holy Spirit really inspires them. (Otherwise, there would always be doubt, when we read the Bible as to whether the text we are reading was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit, or whether it got in there 'by mistake'. We would have to say at Mass, "This is the Word of the Lord,..... probably"!!!).

### ***The principle of 'Sola Scriptura':***

This theory states that there is no authority in the Christian life other than the Bible. No other teacher is to be trusted because all human beings are sinners and capable of error or (worse) of deliberately misleading those they teach. In its extreme form, Sola Scriptura states that unless you can find a particular belief or practice specifically & explicitly encouraged in the Bible, then it is not permitted. It is a teaching which is fundamental to most forms of Protestantism but is one of the greatest differences between Protestantism and Catholicism: the Catholic Church has always opposed it as contrary to the teaching of Christ and (ironically, as we shall see) contrary to the testimony of Sacred Scripture, too! This principle has led some puritans in the seventeenth century, who applied the doctrine without exception and with impeccable logic as well as sincerity, to state that all machinery is contrary to the Gospel. Scissors, pianos, light bulbs, toothpaste and even many types of fruit (coconut, bananas, kiwi etc.) are all forbidden. In the same way marriage is suspect because Christ never fully endorsed it and St. Paul seemed to be almost suspicious of it.

The less extreme position refers only to doctrine: we are bound to believe only the doctrines that are clearly stated in the Bible. Anything else adds to the Revelation of God and is therefore evil. It may sound reasonable, but has frightening consequences because the most fundamental doctrines of the faith are rarely explicitly stated in the Bible: there is no clear doctrine of the Trinity or of the Incarnation; there is no injunction to worship the Holy Spirit as God, is no Creed, permission to write prayers or hymns, celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas or Easter, to form parishes, build churches, appoint vergers. Most extraordinary of all, if the Bible is the only source of authority and we may not follow any other, then this doctrine is itself forbidden, for nowhere in the Sacred Scriptures does it state that this doctrine is to be held or taught! True enough, St. Paul does state that "*all Scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding men's lives and teaching them to be holy*" (2 Tim. 3:16) but this is a long way from saying that only Scripture can be used for these things or that Scripture alone is to be trusted. He says simply that God has inspired Scripture: he leaves open the possibility that God has inspired other writings as well and the possibility that other methods can be trustfully used to teach (such as verbal transmission of the faith). In other words: the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is itself unscriptural and therefore, by its own standards, not a doctrine to be accepted!

Please note that even the proponents of this doctrine are unable to keep it and this was so even for the first real proponents of Sola Scriptura: Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, Cranmer all professed Sola Scriptura with different degrees of consistency. However, all were forced at some stage to clarify their position: Scripture is the sole rule of faith so long as you interpret it as I tell you. In effect, each one taught that their own view of the meaning of Scripture was the sole guaranteed source of absolute truth. In Zurich, Zwingli who led the protestant reformation there and by 1523 was vigorously advocating Sola Scriptura since it freed him from Church influence, was forced only four years later to abandon it entirely in the infant baptism dispute. He argued that infant baptism was consistent with Scripture, but he was challenged by members of his congregation who felt that since the Scriptures do not specifically mention even one infant being baptised, but instead stress the importance of faith in Christ in the one to be baptised, then no infant could be baptised.. They continued therefore that the Scriptures never permit infant baptism and truly scriptural teaching means it is clearly impossible for any infant to qualify. BOTH sides appealed to Scripture, BOTH said that the opposing view was contrary to Scripture. Sola Scriptura could not resolve the dispute. Finally Zwingli had the Anabaptists (as they called themselves) arrested and their leaders executed: they were teaching contrary to Scripture, and this was proved in that they disagreed with him! This is not really Sola Scriptura but *Solus Meus* - my interpretation of scripture is supreme, and mine alone.

The worst effect of Sola Scriptura is that once you establish Scripture as the only guarantor of faith, then all the Christian doctrines begin to unravel. When Scriptures is the only trustworthy source, then only those beliefs that are established beyond doubt in the texts can be trusted. Even my own personal interpretation of the texts of Scripture can't be relied on - only the texts themselves. SO - all we are left with are those doctrines that are explicitly stated in Scripture and never questioned or even ambiguously referred to. That actually leaves very little: there is justification for almost any theological viewpoint from Scripture alone, and there is practically no Christian belief which can not be argued against using other texts from the Scriptures. Take the major cornerstones of Christian belief: each one either has been rejected by one (or more) supposedly Christian group or is at present directly opposed by a Christian organisation:

1. **The Divinity of Jesus Christ** - many early Church communities claimed to follow the Gospel but also rejected the divinity of Christ. Head of the list is Arius, priest in Alexandria, head of the catechetical school there in the early fourth century. Every reference to Christ's divinity in the New Testament he explained away - no text states explicitly that Christ was divine and not created. The Scriptures will bear this interpretation if you hold that Christ was created by the Father who subsequently adopted him by sharing his divine nature with him. Because the Scriptures could not unconditionally refute this heresy, it was left to a Church Council to state in their own language what the Christian faith was. It took over 100 years for Arianism to be defeated – not by reference to Scriptural texts but by a doctrinal formula which Arians were unable to subscribe to - the Creed of Nicaea. The theology is all drawn from the Scriptures - but the Scriptures on their own could be used to support Arius' view too. Remarkably, there is something of a revival of Arianism appearing today: it is rare indeed for any commentator in the media to refer to Christ in any terms other than that of his humanity. Christ is the good teacher, the gentle leader, the innocent victim and social reformer (all

images that Arius could accept) but never the transcendent God, the Prince of Peace, the Holy High Priest, the co-creator of the universe with the Father (all images which Arius would have difficulty with). Indeed, today it is common enough to find theologians arguing that since Christ was fully human, he could not possibly be aware that he was also the Divine Son of God and co-eternal with the Father: all of which is repeatedly and explicitly contradicted in passage after passage of the Gospels (such as the famous claim of Christ to pre-existence in John's Gospel "*I tell you most solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I Am*" - Jn. 8:58). These passages are simply avoided.

2. **The Incarnation of Christ** - he becomes fully man as well as being fully God - in the early years of the Church there were many Christians who felt that this did not match up with Scripture. Both the Gnostics and Docetists (already present and thriving in the Church by 150 A.D.) totally rejected the idea that God could adopt humanity. They argued that Christ just appeared in human form, that he never took on human nature. St. Justin the Martyr and the great St. Irenaeus (both teaching in the second century) in particular were at pains to show up the impossibility of this reasoning (i.e., that if Christ did not truly become man, then mankind can not truly be redeemed). YET the heart of the Christian faith is that Christ has fully and finally taken human nature - "*The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory.*" (Jn. 1:14). This is not just an ancient heresy. There are Christian bodies today that argue that Christ could not be fully human because he only adopted male humanity. Until the Son of God becomes Woman, he is not fully human.

3. **The bodily Resurrection of Christ** - in the early Church it was only non-Christians who denied the reality of Christ's bodily resurrection (especially the Jews and the pagan Romans). Today, it is a popular teaching among the post-doctrinal Christians who feel that we have matured to a point beyond the need for any content of doctrine or to be restricted by what actually happened. The Bishop of Durham in the 1980's was the most famous, describing the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning by the women and the Apostles as "a conjuring trick with bones". This is exactly the stance taken by the Pharisees and Chief Priests - when they hear of the empty tomb, they decide to concoct the story that Christ's body was stolen by the disciples, "*and to this day that is the story among the Jews.*" (Mt. 28:15). The consequence of denying the bodily resurrection of Christ but believing that Christ rose only in a spiritualist, metaphorical way, (i.e., that he didn't really leave the tomb, but the disciples felt that the spirit of their leader was still with them) is to deny the bodily resurrection of human beings. Yet that is the whole point of the Gospel, the mission of Christ, that we should share his rising from the dead and be glorified with him for all eternity in heaven, body and soul together. In the early Church, the Gnostic Christians and other dualists would reject the bodily resurrection of human beings (as they also rejected that Christ ever really took on human nature). Once again, Scripture does not prove the point either way: so the Creed made it clear what the disciples believed "*We believe in the resurrection of the body*" (Apostles Creed).

4. **The existence of God at all** - strange as it may sound, there have been more than a few ministers of Sola Scriptura communities who have believed that the

doctrine that God exists as a personal being is not actually essential to the Gospel or the Bible as a whole. Don Cupitt is perhaps the most famous - he remained a clergyman in the Church of England even after publicly stating that he believed that mankind had matured beyond the need to personalise God. God, as a conscious, personal being did not exist as far as his faith informed him, and there was nothing in Christianity (as he understood it) that required belief in the existence of God. He is not the only one. The Bishops of Norwich and Southwark, amongst others, have dealt with cases of a similar nature and in only one instance to date has an Anglican clergyman been obliged to resign his living by his Bishop on the grounds that this belief is absolutely incompatible with Biblical Christianity. YET all these belong to the Church of England which at the time of its formation, accepted the Bible alone as the source of its doctrine and teaching. Apparently it is felt that even the existence of God is not sufficiently clearly established in Scripture for it to be regarded as a necessary Christian belief.

**5. The Historicity of the Gospels** - early opponents of the Gospels argued that the stories narrated about Christ were too fantastic to be true: the disciples invented them after the rather anticlimactic death of their great leader on a Roman execution cross. The Gospels claim to be the eyewitness accounts of those who were there and swear by the truthfulness of their accounts - that these miracles speaking of the account of the crucifixion, John writes "*This is the evidence of one who saw it - trustworthy evidence, and he knows he speaks the truth - and he gives it so that you may believe as well.*"). YET despite this, many Christians today reject the historicity of large sections of the Gospel. All the miracles are discounted on the grounds that these things just don't happen (a little echo of the attitude of those who heard the first reports of the sinking of the Titanic, and the first reports of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany: because it is not usual, therefore it could not have happened!). Christ's teaching is discounted: they are not his sayings but those of later disciples, which are projected into Christ's mouth to make them acceptable. The remainder (non-teaching stories which contain no miracles) may vaguely refer to real events, but have been so changed in order to make bogus theological points that they can not be relied on to record what truly happened. This does not over state the case: almost all liberal protestant bible scholars take this view in one form or another - & it was the key teaching of Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential protestant biblical scholar of the century. He denied that anything substantial that is recorded in the Gospels actually happened (and yet he belonged to a Church which declared that the Scriptures alone spoke reliable and timeless truth).

**6. The reality of human freedom** - in the early Church it was the doctrine of predestination that opposed the fundamental Scriptural idea of human freedom and therefore responsibility (after all, the notion of sin and guilt, both very well-established Biblical concepts, presuppose that man is able to choose what he does - and therefore is held accountable for the decisions he makes). By this doctrine, God chooses who will be saved and who damned - irrespective of what we do, good or bad. Liberal protestant theologians today hold a similar view, only without having to believe in God. Today, human freedom and thus responsibility is removed not by the Almighty but by conditioning: if I steal it is because of the way I was raised, the values I was taught or the psychological battering I received from parents/school/church when I was a child. With this way of thinking, no



human being is responsible for the decisions they take - and therefore they have no true freedom in picking right from wrong: it is all a matter of the programming we received when infants. God has given us the illusion of free will, and this serves to mask the reality of a totally determinist world: I do whatever I do not because I really want to or approve of it but because that is the decision I have become programmed to make. Scripture does recognise the limitations of free will and the strains that can be put on it by past experience or family pressure etc. (see how Solomon caves in to the pressure exerted on him by his pagan wives to join them in their worship of pagan idols in spite of their need for human blood sacrifices - *1 Kings 11:1-8*) - BUT Scripture never exonerates the sinner entirely, nor does it ever teach that the sinful action becomes acceptable if it was not my fault that I did it. Even if I didn't mean to do it, it is still a wrongful act.

7. **The reality of sin** - this is similar to the last. If man is not actually free at all because of all the hidden traumas of his childhood, then he is incapable of incurring guilt (because it is never really his fault that he does things wrong). If that is so, he is incapable of sinning, because this requires an element of freedom to say no. This argument is so massively contrary to Scripture that it is challenging to know where to begin. Suffice it to say that St. John does not just teach that sin is possible, but adds (almost in passing, as if it is so well-known that it needs no explanation or justification) that some sins are so serious, and man is capable of doing them and being accountable for them, that they are mortal, killing the life of grace in the soul (*1 Jn. 5:16-17*). Yet, many Sola Scriptura churches today continue to argue that we are all such victims of our upbringing that sin is impossible for us to commit.

8. **The existence of Heaven or hell** - it is rare today to find any biblical scholar from a Sola Scriptura community who will state they believe what they read about heaven or hell in the Scriptures. Most believe the language is figurative, borrows heavily from prevailing cultural idioms of the day and so can't be taken to express anything significant. Heaven and hell are re-interpreted to refer to what we experience here on earth. In this way, we no longer need to believe in eternal reward or eternal suffering (despite the repeated references to both in the Scriptures).

9. **Marriage and divorce** - the most obvious example of where Sola Scriptura churches have failed to live up to the teaching of Scripture. It is not the Church that forbids divorce and remarriage but Christ: he does so explicitly, simply and unequivocally. Indeed, so shatteringly clear is his teaching ("*He who divorces his wife and marries another is guilty of adultery.*" *Mt. 19:9*) that the Apostles are stunned and mutter that it would be better never to marry if that was the case! Christ never corrects them, or says he was only joking or exaggerating the issue - he actually confirms their impression of what he had taught by agreeing that it is indeed a hard teaching and could only be accepted by those who had been called to that way of life (*Mt. 19:10-12*). What is the record concerning this teaching in the communities that claim to be governed by Scripture and Scripture alone? Divorce and remarriage is practised, accepted or even positively defended in every Christian denomination that was founded on the principle of Sola Scriptura. Christ's teaching, laid out for us in Scripture, has not just been by-passed, it has been completely reversed: divorce is easily available and practised not only by the

rank and file Christian (now 50% of marriages in this country end in divorce and many result in second marriages) but by Christian ministers - it is no longer extraordinary to hear of clergymen, elders and even one Anglican Bishop who are divorced and remarried or married to one who has already been divorced. The only denominations to have preserved the teaching of Christ that divorce and remarriage is wrong are those who rejected the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. (Ironically, the Reformation in this country was sparked off by the desire of the King to put aside his wife and marry another. Because the Catholic Church was unable to authorise this as it ran clearly contrary to Scripture, Henry VIII established the Church of England on the condition that it permit him to divorce and remarry - the very same Church of England claimed at the same time that the only teaching authority to be followed, and followed to the letter, was Scripture - the very authority which prevented the Catholic Church from giving in to the King's demand!)

The conclusion? If these key Christian beliefs, which are embedded in the Scriptures, can be systematically discarded by communities that profess to be solely governed by the doctrines found in Scripture, then which beliefs will remain? If these can go, all the others will already have gone. Christianity becomes not what Christ taught but what I am comfortable with believing. This is definitely not the Gospel of Christ but the Gospel of Me.

The doctrine of Scripture alone leads inevitably to division, chaos and cafeteria Christianity, where each believer picks the beliefs he likes and discards those which ask too much of him - is this not perilously close to Pharisaism as Christ encountered it - pick-n-mix faith? Any and practically all theories about Christ can be justified by some interpretation of the texts. If there is no additional benchmark to interpret the Scriptures, then there is no firm foundation to Christianity: what the apostles (or Christ himself) taught is irrelevant since every mutually contradictory interpretation of the text is as valid as the next one. If this seems extreme or exaggerated, look at what has happened to the Churches which defend Sola Scriptura as an article of faith: there are over 20,000 Christian denominations in the world today nearly all of which were created by a division of a pre-existing community (the Presbyterian Church in America has splintered into more than 1000 different churches because they have different views on the meaning of the Scriptures: they joke amongst themselves that they are the "Split Ps"). Since there is no body to give definitive interpretations of the Scriptures, every tiny difference of opinion leads to a new Church. It has meant that every opinion is as authentically Christian as the next, even to the rejection of the most foundational Christian doctrines (such as belief in God!). Sola Scriptura sounds simple, effective, liberating and appealing. Its' effect has been divisive, to stir up hostility within communities, to sow doubt and confusion in the minds of believers over even the basic shared tenets of Christianity and to ensure that Christians have to fight the same battles today that were fought and won by great theologians and prayers centuries ago, in effect re-inventing the Christian wheel. For instance, many modern protestant scholars are discovering that Christ's words to Peter "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*" etc. actually presuppose the founding of an office of leadership which implies that there will be successors and that he will hand on to them his authority when either he retires or dies in office - a 'breakthrough' and stroke of interpretative genius which the Catholic Church has taught and defended without interruption since the first century: Sola Scriptura was the justification for all

reformed communities rejecting this interpretation in the sixteenth century). It has taken 400 years to begin to undo the damage that the unscriptural doctrine of Sola Scriptura has inflicted on the faith of the apostles.

The Catholic Church has never taught that Scripture alone is our rule of faith. We do teach that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. This means that while the human writers were engaged in their task, the Spirit not only prevented them recording error as truth but also positively used them to record all that he desired recorded and nothing in addition to this - what is written is exactly what the Spirit intended, without extra phrases or books being wrongfully inserted, and without some of the Spirit's teaching being left out. This means that the Catholic Church claims for the Scriptures what very few others dare to claim: that they are inerrant - they teach no error in what they mean to teach. The Church goes further: we venerate the Scriptures as we venerate the Lord's Body (in Holy Communion) because Christ is present and speaks through both (*see the Catechism of the Catholic Church para 103, and Vatican II, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, para 21*).

What of the mistakes the Scriptures make: the inconsistencies (Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey or the foal of a colt or both, Christ dying on the day of Preparation for Passover or on the following day, Noah taking one pair of animals into the ark or seven pairs); the unscientific statements (such as Genesis 1 concerning creation, or the implication that the sun travels round the earth)? These are not twentieth century or even nineteenth century observations - we should not think that after 1900 years we have finally uncovered the deathblow to the Scriptures or to faith. The earliest Fathers of the Church had noticed these problems and were answering them by the time of St. Justin the Martyr (c. 150 A.D.). Their response still stands: the theological truths the Scriptures present are laid out free from error and can be trusted completely. This holds for the historical evidence too. All that the human authors of the Scriptures meant to affirm, is affirmed by the Holy Spirit (this is the meaning of 'inspiration') and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth: whatever the Holy Spirit inspires is wholly true. We must be quite clear on this point: the Catholic Church does not limit the truthfulness of Sacred Scripture to the religious teachings in the Bible, or to theology: we believe that EVERYTHING which the human writers intended to teach (that includes geography, history, genealogy etc.) was written at the prompting and with the full participation of the Holy Spirit, and therefore must be taken as absolutely free from error.

Where there is a contradiction, it is often an apparent contradiction, which a closer reading of the text clarifies. Where there is an irresolvable contradiction, it concerns not formal teaching but incidental detail: this does not compromise the belief that the Scriptures are inerrant because the Scriptures are not teaching with regard to these details. Moreover, where there appears to be conflict between science and Scripture, this conflict is imposed on the text rather than deriving out of it. Galileo was condemned because he ventured to interpret the Bible with the criteria of a scientist: he argued that since the Book of Joshua states that God made the sun stand still (so that Joshua could finish a battle against the Amorites – *Joshua 10:12-15*), this means the Bible teaches that the sun revolves around the earth. Since this can be proved to be a scientific impossibility, it means that the Bible teaches error. He presumed that the Bible was claiming to make scientific observations: condemning it as erroneous for saying the sun stood still is as absurd as banning all use of the phrase "sunrise will be

at 6.30 (or whatever)", or "the sun rises in the east" - these are all false statements if we take them as scientific observations: but they are perfectly acceptable if we interpret them as statements about time made from the perspective of how things appear to be (the sun does appear to rise - so we still say so even when we know this is not strictly true).

This raises the issue of interpretation: the Scriptures can not be read at face value, and often their meaning needs to be interpreted. What can we take as literally true, and what is a figure of speech. What is exaggeration? Which stories are parables and which are historical? Which teachings are no longer binding and which regulations still apply? What teaching is optional and what is obligatory? All this is really the issue of authority - who has the authority to settle questions in dispute or interpretative disagreements? Is it every man for himself? Is the opinion of every Christian correct because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, or can individual Christians get it wrong? If so, is there anyone or any group whose interpretation we can trust implicitly? If so, HOW can we trust them when we can't put such trust in anyone else or even in ourselves?

This is where Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium come in. The Catholic Church does not tie the Word of God down to the Scriptures since the witness of the Scriptures themselves is that the Word of God primarily applies to CHRIST. He is the supreme rule of faith for the Christian. Where is his teaching to be found? The Church responds without hesitation - in the Church. This is, after all, the evidence of Scripture:

- *"I hope to come to you soon, but 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." (1 Tim. 3:14-15)*

To St. Paul, the final arbiter in matters of faith was not a book or collection of books, even when he acknowledged that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit and advantageous for refuting error (2 Tim. 3:16) - the great shield which defends the truth is the CHURCH. In matters of faith, resolution comes from the Church because the Church is Christ's Body - the instrument through which Christ speaks authoritatively. This should come as no surprise, seeing as it is only the authority of the Church that claims that the books we regard as Scriptural are actually the ones the Holy Spirit inspired. If we doubt the belief that the Church has the authority to define matters of faith, then we throw into doubt even which books we can trust as Sacred and trustworthy. It is not a choice between the Church OR the Scriptures: it is a choice between either the Church AND the Scriptures or neither. If we doubt the Church's word for things, then we have to doubt the truth of all that the Church has defined: and one of the first things the Church defined was which books of the early Church were truly inspired by the Holy Spirit.

## **D. The fullness of the Word of God: Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture**

God's Word is Christ. The fullness of Christ's revelation about the Father is contained in him, not in any single repository. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it has been put down for us in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As such, it demands our highest reverence. But the speech of God is not exhausted in the words of our Scriptures - *"Behold, I am with you until the ending of the age"* (Mt. 28:20). Christ continues to inspire his people, revealing himself to them in many ways (cf. St. Paul's encounter with Christ personally on the road to Damascus). We profess a living Word of God: Christ's never-ending guidance of His Church, and his continual teaching through the twin medium of the Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. Christ gave his authority to teach to his apostles: through them, Christ would continue to teach the Church: *"He who hears you, hears Me"* (Lk. 10:16). When the apostles taught the content of faith in communion with each other, Christ guaranteed to be the one teaching, through them. This, therefore, also constitutes the Word of God, as it is Christ, the Word, who is speaking. Both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, therefore, originate in Christ, and thus both are regarded by the Church as having the highest & equal authority.

- *"Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together & communicate one with another. For both of them, flowing out of the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal."* (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 9)
- *"The apostles entrusted the "Sacred deposit" of the faith, contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church. .... "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". This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome."* (C.C.C. 84 & 85, quoting Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 10)

### **The Magisterium**

Sacred Tradition is that part of Revelation which is not recorded explicitly in Sacred Scripture. It is not doubtful simply because it is not written down in the Bible any more than British law is doubtful because it is not enshrined in a formal constitution. Both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are interpreted authoritatively by the living teaching office of the Church, as it did in the times of the Apostles. The name we give to it is the 'Magisterium' of the Church: this just means the teaching office of the Church. It rests with the successors of the apostles - those chosen by the twelve during their lifetime to inherit their authority: we call them bishops. It is the Holy Spirit who guides and protects their teaching, as he did the teaching of the apostles. We can be confident of this because of Christ's promise *"I am with you to the close of the age"* (Mt. 28:20) and because without it, we would have to believe that Christ gave us the full and complete truth during his lifetime on earth but gave no guarantee that this teaching would survive intact to be handed on to each new generation.

1. Sacred Scripture is the Word of God in its written and inspired form: it is free from error in all it teaches because of the unique guarantee of its author, God himself. The Church does not apply the term "inspired" to any other books,

teachings or pronouncements, even to the teachings we believe are infallibly taught.

2. Sacred Tradition is the Word of God in its non-scriptural form – oral or written. It is not "inspired" because we do not claim that God is the author of Sacred Tradition in the way that he is of Sacred Scripture. We claim that Sacred Tradition is infallibly taught - i.e., that the Holy Spirit preserves the Church from teaching error as truth. This is a negative protection rather than a positive origin. God does not write the statements of the Church's teaching - but he does stand as guarantor that they contain no error. There is no guarantee that the statements are prudently phrased or spoken at the best time or in the best manner: BUT there is the guarantee that what is stated is fully true and protected by the power of the Holy Spirit.
3. "Ignorance of Sacred Scripture is ignorance of Christ" St. Jerome. This holds true for the Old Testament as well as for the New, since the New is hidden in the Old and the Old is made manifest and its teachings revealed in the light of the New. Christ himself bore witness to this. Speaking of the Old Testament, he said to the Pharisees and Scribes: *"You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me ... Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me."* (Jn. 5:39, 45-46). The mystery and person of Christ lies at the heart of every book of the Scriptures.
4. The Magisterium is the formal teaching office of the Church: the bishops in union with the Pope preach the Word of God and explain its meaning. They are protected in this by the Holy Spirit who ensures that their solemn interpretation is faithful to the teaching of Christ as contained in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.
5. All three - Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium - flow from the same source: Jesus Christ. In different ways, the key to the truthfulness and reliability of each of them is the Holy Spirit. Scripture is interpreted by the Magisterium in accordance with Tradition. The Magisterium is taught and informed by Sacred Scripture as the prime (but not sole) rule of faith: it seeks to explain and teach more fully the truths which are embedded there. Sacred Tradition is the corpus of formal teaching concerning the doctrine of Scripture, which in itself is constantly explored by the Church through prayer and theological investigation. Each is intrinsically related to the other: they do not compete or conflict because each one sheds light on the others and all three flow from the same source (the Word of God, Christ himself). Through all of them, Christ shows himself to those who would accept him in faith.
6. To ignore the formal teaching authority of the Church is to close our ears to Christ, the Word, instructing his disciples in our present day. It is no less to reject Christ than the act of rejecting all or any part of the Sacred Scriptures.
7. For more, see C.C.C 80-95. Also Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*.